Mr Zero

A Barry London Book

by Mark Slade

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Mr Zero

For
Tracey,
the smartest person I know
&
Betty Jane,
who always liked a good mystery

1

Present day……..

London followed the wrecker to Billy Hope's shop in a rental car. He finally got the Cougar back from the Feds. Choaladi had an ATF on his payroll and he fixed it so it looked like the car went missing when they impounded everything from the sex cult's commune. The Fed's raided them a month ago, and London barely got out of there. The '73 Cougar was shot all to hell, bullet holes from the ATF's guns littered the car and blew the trunk lid and hood off, shattered the glass in all windows and windshield. Billy said he could fix it if (knock off a thousand bucks) London could fix something for him.

London was sent to Gemma City to help someone else, someone he didn't care to help, but Choaladi was his boss and he did respect him.

London didn't get back to Gemma, New Jersey much. As a matter of fact, he had not been there in almost ten years. He had no family living there anymore, so what was the point of going back? Only thing left in Gemma was bad luck, and even worse, ghosts he never buried.

"Barry fucking London. Been a long time," Billy said, taking London's hand in his for a brief handshake.

"Yeah. Nearly ten years," London said, looking around the garage. "This place yours?"

"It is. With a little help from some friends. I'm sure you know the same people."

Billy scoffed. "I do, but I claim no friendships. Just business is all."

Billy nodded. "I heard you went inside for a while."

"I did a stretch. Nothing to write home about," London said.

"Look at you!" Billy chuckled. "You stopped sportin' that mustache huh?"

"Yeah…I was tryin' to look harder than I was. Having to deal with what's on the streets. Luckily I was wised up."

"I see that. Still wearin' jeans? I thought I'd see you in an Armani suit, the way some people on the street have been talking about you. Say…" Billy had a sudden pained look on his face. "The last time I saw you was at Gavin Knowles funeral."

"Yeah," London nodded. "Gavin was a good guy." Gavin hung out with some of the same guys as London, but he never took to the streets or had business with 'made' guys. Instead, he went into the Army, studied architecture and then died at twenty-eight.

"He was. Sorry to hear he passed. Killed in action. Afghanistan."

"He was a good guy. I always liked Gavin," London said.

"That sort of thing takes a toll on a family," Billy said.

"So I've heard. You see Samantha around?"

"Yeah," Billy chuckled. "Every morning and every evening."

"Oh. You do? What? You live next door or…"

"No," Billy grinned, his body weaved around like a kid with nervous energy. "I married her."

"You…married Samantha Knowles?" London was amused by this revelation. Samantha Knowles was the hottest girl in the neighborhood. Every guy on Twenty-Third Street wanted a date with Samantha. Every guy in the neighborhood was heartbroken when she married Gavin. Before Gavin, every guy was scared shitless of Officer Holt,

her father. "How does Officer Holt feel about you?"

"He's okay with me," Billy said. London smirked at Billy. "Sometimes he's okay with me. And now he's retired, I get to see him as much as I see Sam."

London laughed. "Quaint little family you have there."

"Yep. I even took in Gavin's two boys. Which is…where you come in."

"Oh. How so?"

"They are being charged with arson," Billy said. "The cops said they burned down the Coffin Hop. That club on Sixth Street. I don't believe either one of them did it. Hell, they are only eighteen, Barry. This could ruin their lives. I know they didn't do it."

"You need me to look into this, right?"

"You do this for me," Billy said. "And I'll knock off a thousand or so on your bill. Hell, I'll forget the time you took Shelly out." Billy laughed.

Shelly Hope. London hadn't heard that name spoken in years. She was a tall glass of water with curly blonde hair. He wondered if she looked the same. Been a lot of years. No one could possibly be the same as they were when they were sixteen. Hell, even London knew he wasn't the same. Not even the same as five years ago.

"Shelly still live in the neighborhood?" London had a big goofy smile on his face. He looked slightly embarrassed.

"Yeah," Billy stopped smiling. "Funny you mention her."

"Why is that?"

"She's the lead investigator in this."

"You fucking kidding me? Your own sister is a cop? Jesus. You talk to her about it?"

Billy scoffed. "You think my sister is dumb? She only interviewed me for the case." Billy looked away, then back at

London. "For fuck's sake, Barry. Before this firebug shit, Shelly and me, we're on the outs. You know, my ties, and… a secret comes out my old man had whole other family going on besides us."

"No kidding. That's a hell of a secret," London said.

"No shit. My Ma… took a toll on her. At sixty-four, she moved in with her sister up in Buffalo. Divorced the old man. I still talk to him. Shelly… "

"Talks to your mom. She picked her side."

Billy shrugged. "I don't blame her. I talk to Ma, too. But I ain't shittin' on Dad, either. He had his reasons I guess. Dumb mistake that spiraled out of control. At his age," Billy shook his head. "I don't know how much time I got left with him… or Ma."

"I get it," London said. "Damn. What a mess. All right. I'll go by the jail and talk to the boys."

Billy's cell-phone alerted him he had a call. He held up his finger and said, "I have to take this. Sam's calling."

He said hello. London watched his face. A huge grin surfaced. London could hear Samantha's voice on the other end. Smooth, silky. Every word enunciated like she was enjoying chocolate pudding. They said their goodbyes and 'I love you'. Billy ended the phone call, placed his cell phone back in his trouser pocket.

"Oh man! That's great!" He clasped his hands together.

"What's great?" London smiled back at him.

"They let the boys go! Hot shit, Barry! Dropped all charges! They said it was an electrical thing that happened!"

"Hey, that is great!" London shook Billy's hand, slapped him on the back. "I don't need to look into it, then."

"Yeah!" Billy thought for a second. "Wait… I'm still giving you that discount."

"Nahhhh…you don't have to… "

"Yeah, I do, Barry. Old friends."

London chuckled. "Okay. Thanks, Billy."

"Sure. Why don't you come over for dinner later? See the boys and Sam. Been a long time."

"Yeah," London nodded. "I can do that."

"Come on by, around six. Here's the address," Billy scribbled on an old invoice, handed it to London.

"You live in Reshards?" London cackled. "Fuck, business must be good."

Billy stopped smiling. "Gavin's life insurance paid for it."

London had nothing to say. He shook Billy's hand, told him he'd see him at six.

2

London found the hotel his friends and he used to hang out at. In the back parking lot they would drink, talk crap and take their girlfriends to the movie house next door. The movie house is now a Church Of The Latter Day Saints and the back parking lot is a Dunkin Doughnuts. He registered for a room on the second floor. He took his stuff up. The hotel had even changed. No longer was it under the family name of the people who owned it, but it had become a lot fancier. Red carpet in the lobby, mahogany furniture in the room.

In the lobby, he noticed a man wearing a check coat and a blue tie. He was rotund and had an arrogance about him that said 'made guy'. When London was looking out his hotel window, going down memory lane, he saw the guy in the check coat walking around the Dunkin Doughnuts with three other friends, all bigger than he was. The three other men were dressed a lot more casual; jeans, T-shirt, or a polo shirt unbuttoned. Each one would look toward London's room. They were so obvious about watching London, so comfortable, he was sure the hotel was under their boss's protection.

The four men sat at a bench. One left and returned with coffee. Again, each one would turn and look toward the hotel room. London was curious. He decided he needed coffee from Dunkin Doughnuts too.

London got his coffee. He stood at the exit of Dunkin Doughnuts and watched the four men watch him. He raised his cup to salute them. The man in the check jacket stood, tugged at the sleeves of his jacket. He walked briskly to the middle of the parking lot. London decided to meet

with the man. As soon as they were face to face the man began to speak. London threw the hot coffee in his face.

The man screamed, fell to his knees as his hands immediately covered his sweltering, raw cheeks. London grabbed the man by his thick curly hair and brought his knee hard into his chin. The other three men were right on London, but backed away as soon as he showed them his Glock. The man in the check jacket screamed. He raised his head up and opened his mouth to show he'd bit his tongue. Blood drained to his bottom gums, lips and formed on his teeth.

"Get the fuck back!" He ordered.

The men held their hands up and stepped backwards into each other. The last man nearly fell over, grabbed hold of a stop sign to hold himself up.

"Okay!" London screamed, pointed the Glock at each of them. "Who do you fuckers work for, and what do you want?"

"We work for Paul Donaldson!" The second man screamed nervously.

"We just wanted to talk!" The third man said. "We just wanted to talk is all… We swear."

"The fucking lawyer? He runs those pathetic commercials asking people to sue the lightbulb company for hurting people's eyes? That guy?!"

The man in the check suit mumbled something, nodded his head. "Can I get up?" He eventually said after stammering.

London sighed. Looked around to see if anyone was watching this scene. One elderly couple stood at Dunkin Doughnuts entrance. When London smiled at them, they hurried through the door.

"Let's get out of here before the cops show up." London placed his Glock back in the breast holster. The

second guy grabbed the man in the check suit and helped him to his feet. They followed London back into the hotel and in the elevator that took him to his room. He opened the door, ushered the four of them inside. He closed the door and said, "Get Donaldson up here. I want to hear what he has to say."

3

One year and three months ago……..

London heard a bumping sound as the Chevrolet Caprice crossed the North Dakota state line. The bumping was coming from the trunk. Mavers was awake. The punk called London 'my friend' one too many times. Plus the firebug would not shut up. If London had his way, 'Georgy-boy' Mavers would be floating in the harbor, face down. But Barry London was trying very hard to get away from that side of 'the life'.

London was a top notch criminal ten years ago. Whatever the job was, he not only carried it out, he carried it out very well. So well, in fact, that he was in demand from other bosses in New York and loaned out to other bosses around the world. It was rumored that even other government leaders asked for London. How true that was, he didn't know. He did know he would have turned it down, since Barry London hated to be anywhere but New York City.

He didn't like working for other people. Rarely did the jobs go well. Someone always screwed things up for London.

Still, he worked for Peter Choaladi, and Choaladi never broke that sacred trust with London. He never once lied to him. That's why he'd do what was asked of him. No question of loyalty, there.

The bumping persisted. Newly kept turning around, glancing out the back window as if he expected someone to appear on the back of the car. Newly was a friend from the past. Back in the days they roamed the streets of Gemma

City, looking for any kind of trouble and any of making a buck. One of the few London kept in touch with, after Newly left New York and found himself in Austin, running a bar for an ex-Rodeo star by the name of Randolph Henderson. Henderson's daughter had been mixed up with some college guys selling Meth and turning young girls out. They met Henderson's daughter online back when AOL was king.

She ran away from home, and got addicted to crack and started turning tricks. Henderson hired London. But it was Newly who saved Henderson's daughter from a torture porn flick being made. Six of her prostitute friends didn't make it. The girl became infatuated with Newly, which turned into love. Henderson made Newly a deal. He would run three of Henderson's five bars in Austin and marry his daughter.

The marrying part never came to fruition. Newly was terrified of marriage after witnessing the hell his parents went through. For six years Newly lived with the girl. Five years and six months in their house. She ran away with an electronics genus who now owns most of the Phone App business. Tough breaks.

"Maybe we should let him out," Newly said.

London cut his eyes at Newly. He grunted a no. Newly shrugged, looked out the window at the passing dark trees in the background.

"Pretty country," Newly said.

"Shut up," London barked.

"I'm just trying to start a conversation."

"I know," London snarled. "And you are giving me a headache. Along with that asshole banging on my trunk!"

"I thought you rented this…?" Newly stopped talking when London cut his eyes again. He sighed, went back to watching the trees and the occasional deer on the

side of the longest, straightest highway he'd ever travelled.

Newly turned on the car radio. A man was screaming at the top of his lungs about lowest finance rates for one year for a car commercial. London turned the radio off. Newly didn't like that. He turned it back on. By that time music was being played. *Wrapped around your finger* by The Police. London hated The Police. He hated Sting. He hated 80's music.

London turned the radio off.

"Hey!" Newly objected. "I like that song." He turned the radio back on.

London turned it off.

"Good," he told Newly. "Then you can like it in your own vehicle."

Newly sighed. "This is not your car. You rented it from Fat Freddie." Newly turned the radio back on. "Besides, this guitar lick is catchy."

"It sucks," London grumbled under his breath.

"Just because this song came out in the 80's doesn't mean it all sucks, Barry," Newly said.

"Fuck the 80's," London said. "Long live Dean Martin," he made the sign of the holy cross with his right hand while steering with his left hand.

"Please… now you sound like my old man. Dean Martin is not holy," Newly took a drink from his coffee that was now cold. They'd purchased it several hundred miles ago and when it was still light outside. He winced. "God, I wish there was a gas station around here."

"To a philistine like you, sure. To millions who believe in God," London chuckled.

"And the other half believe that Elvis or the Beatles saved their lives from a dismal existence."

"Yeah," London lit a cigarette. He took a long draw, held it, then blew the smoke in Newly's face. "Keep

following the devil, Newly. All the way to hell."

Newly coughed up a lung, and cursed London under his breath.

The bumping started again.

This time London couldn't take it anymore. He rolled the car window down and tossed the cigarette out. He jerked the wheel and pulled over the side of the highway, kicking up dirt and gravel. The Caprice came to a sudden stop. Newly fell forward. His head slammed against the dashboard and his cold coffee spilled all over his pants.

"Damn it!" Newly screamed. "Can't you give a guy a warning before you do something like that?!"

"Shut up," London said calmly. He opened the car door and jumped out. He took the Glock from his breast holster and slowly walked up to the back of the car.

"Oh shit!" Newly got out of the riders side. "We're gonna do this now? Barry, I really wish you'd let me know the plan… "

"Shut up, Newly," London said again.

"You're starting to tick me off… "

"Pop the trunk," London ordered.

Newly hesitated. Their eyes met and he could see London was not in the mood to argue. Newly paced himself to the driver's side. He bent down and pulled the lever. The trunk popped open and two child-like hands pushed it open all the way.

A small, thin, balding man in a woman's see-through nightgown, flew out of the trunk screaming. He took off in a sprint, the nightgown rode up in the back, revealing the man wore nothing underneath it. Newly thought he was going to be sick after witnessing that. London fired the Glock in Mavers direction but just above his head. Mavers instantly fell to his knees, sobbing.

"Don't kill me… don't kill me… please… " Mavers

repeated.

London and Newly ran to the guy. Newly pulled the man back to the car.

"Don't kill me… please," Mavers let Newly lead him by the strap of the nightgown. "I love my wife… I love my kids… they… they need me… Please… "

London followed close behind, shoving the barrel of the Glock in the back of Mavers head. "Get on your knees!" London commanded.

Without thinking about it, Mavers fell to his knees. He bawled harder, hacking up something brown and yellow, letting it drip from his mouth down his chin, where it froze, before wiping it away.

"I told you I didn't want to hear a syllable uttered by you," London said, resting the cold barrel of the Glock on Mavers neck. "Didn't I?"

"Yes… Oh, God… yes… " Mavers quivered.

"Why do you persist in pushing my buttons? You get a rise out of this, I bet."

"No, no, I swear….." Mavers swallowed hard. "L-look in the trunk… please…"

"What in God's name is he talking about…?" Newly gasped. His eyes grew as big as softballs. He cursed under his breath. "Shit balls! Look in there, Barry! Look!" Newly pointed.

London peered inside the trunk. He saw a man's arm lying across a spare tire.

London sighed, shook his head. "Shit balls," he said.

4

Fat Freddie's car lot looked more like a junk yard. London walked past engine parts littered on the graveled ground. Hollowed out cars stacked on top of each other. This situation pissed London off so much so he left Newly at the hotel. Fat Freddie knew what was going on and London was willing to beat it out of him if he had to.

Two pit bulls came racing around a shack, barking, growling, and foaming at the mouth. The first pit leaped into the air. London caught the dog by its head and twisted hard, breaking its neck. He dropped the limp, dead animal on the ground.

The second pit bull cornered London between two recently burned out vehicles. The scent of charred iron and steel offended London's nostrils. They stared each other down. London wasn't so much as scared as he was juiced up and very aware of the danger that lurked in his surroundings. He figured he had two options. The first was to try and out run the dog. Bad idea. That dog was fast as he saw just minutes before. It would chase him down from behind and chow down on his back legs.

He chose the second option.

London drew his Glock and fired twice. The dog yelped, catching both bullets in its right eye. Brain and blood splattered one of the burned out cars. London sighed deeply. He didn't like hurting animals. Especially dogs and more to the fact he hated hearing that pits always got into trouble. They got a bad rep just like a lot of guys he met on the street. Most of them are good deep down inside, they just hadn't discovered it yet.

No, London was not happy he had to kill an animal

that didn't know any better. But it's called survival out there in the concrete jungle.

An obese man opened the door to the shack and stared angrily until he realized London was standing over his two dead dogs. Fat Freddie slammed the door and locked it. He nervously searched his desk for the .38 his brother in law gave him. It was too late by the time he found it. The flimsy door was kicked in and London stood in the doorway, ready to rush Fat Freddie.

The .38 went off just as London grabbed Freddie's chubby arm and twisted it up. The bullet struck the ceiling and debris fell over them. London easily wrangled the gun from Freddie. He laughed as he tossed it away.

"You were going to use that on me, Freddie?" London took a step closer and Freddie yelped.

"No! No! I swear, Barry! I'd never shoot you," Freddie held up his hands to try and block any punches coming his way. "I swear on my Mother!"

London took hold of the man's flowered shirt and helped him to his feet. "You do, huh?" London said. "You swear on your Mother? What kind of man swears on his Mother… or… even swears at his Mother? That's what you mean."

"No," Fat Freddie was shocked at the implication. "I'd never swear at my Mother… never!"

"You swear not to lie to me?" London asked with all sincerity.

"Well… yes!"

"Why was there a dead body in the trunk of that car I rented from you, and who is it?"

"I… What dead body?"

London slapped Freddie across the fat cheeks. Freddie yelped.

"You said you wouldn't lie, Freddie," London said.

His eyebrows narrowed and his dark eyes screwed in with a hard, evil glare. "You swore you wouldn't lie to me. How did that body get in the trunk of the car I rented from you and who is the dead man?"

"I don't know!" Fat Freddie cried out.

London immediately smacked Freddie across cheeks again. Freddie yelped and tried to shake off the stinging on his red face.

"Okay, okay! I'll tell you!" Freddie said, tears welled up in his eyes.

"Who put the body in the trunk?" London demanded.

"I don't know specifically… I do know who had me arrange the body to go into the trunk…"

"Go on. Spill it, fat man!"

"Okay! Look, I don't know his real name…"

London threatened to draw his gun from his breast holster and he could smell something horrible. Fat Freddie had defecated his pants. He decided to tone down the threats. Now it was time to be the good guy.

"I'm sorry Freddie. I'm sorry I hit you," London helped the man to his swivel behind his desk. "Have a seat and a Chester."

London took a cigarette out of the pack he'd almost finished in a day and a half. So much for trying to quit. Maybe he should have taken Pop up on using the vape he offered. But London never liked the smell of those things. Now, a cigarette… ah… pure bliss. Freddie took the cigarette gingerly and placed it between his thin lips. He leaned in as London offered the flame from his lighter.

London lit a cigarette for himself and sat on the edge of the desk. He took a long draw and exhaled it slowly. "I've been too rough on you. This was a job forced on me. So I was mad from the beginning and finding an extra body…

well… that lit my fuse even more."

"Trust me, Barry," Freddie tried to smoke the same time he began to breathe heavily. "I didn't want to do this either. This… this guy… they call him Mr. Zero. Shit, man. He killed Rollo."

"Rollo? Rollo Baker? Who controls St. Paul all the way to Ontario?"

"Did control, Barry. That's the correction I have to make on your statement. Mr. Zero controls the Midwest along with southeast Texas. He can't get a stronghold on the Gilmour Brothers."

"Who's the body, Freddie?"

"Rollo Baker," Fat Freddie said.

There was a sharp exhale heard. London had heard it before. He knew it came from a silencer. He forced himself on the floor of the shack and buried his head behind Freddie's chair. There was nothing but silence. London jumped to his feet and ran to the broken window. He saw a short man in a ski mask running away from the shack. He held a Walther PPK with the silencer on the barrel.

5

Donaldson came to the room. He was a tall man that wore dull, drab suits and wore thin glasses that sat on a large prominent nose. At some point in his life had been thin and was now showing the gut that comes with middle age and thinning hair combed over a bald spot. He stepped into the room, nodded to everyone, but showed displeasure to the man in the check suit. He offered his hand to London, and was taken aback when London snubbed him.

"Come in and only speak when I ask a question," London said.

"Was it necessary to injure Bruno? I need him as a legal aid…"

"Shut up!" London screamed in Donaldson's face.

Donaldson looked hurt. "See here…"

London took his Glock from the holster and pointed it Donaldson's large nose.

"Oh," Donaldson said. "I see."

"He don't have the disc, Mr. Donaldson. I don't even think he knows about it…" One of the men said before Donaldson gave him the look of death to shut up.

"He—uh-he's talking about another case…" Donaldson tried to explain. London wasn't having it.

"Do I have to repeat myself?" London asked. Donaldson flashed a smile and shook his head no. "Good." London sheathed his Glock. "Why did you hire these men to hurt me?"

"I…" Donaldson looked over at Bruno, and he nodded to Donaldson, encouraging him to go on. "I really did not hire them to hurt you, so speak. I asked Bruno to hire them to: A): Watch you. B): Talk with you, reason with,"

Donaldson sighed. "C): To… yes… convince you… um… even if it… um… meant to hurt you… but not badly!"

"What did you want me to do or not do? Usually thugs… and I use the term very loosely for this bunch… thugs are hired to get info or scare someone off." London said.

"That is the reason," Donaldson grinned. London threatened Donaldson with his piercing dark eyes. Donaldson stopped grinning.

"What is it, Mr. Donaldson you do not want me to do?"

"Oh," he thought hard for a few seconds. "A client has… hired me to keep you from looking into the Arson that recently happened."

"Who is this client?"

"Oh, no, no, no, Mr. London. I do not give…"

"Who is the client?!" London screamed, reached for his Glock again.

Donaldson closed his eyes. "I cannot tell you, Mr. London… oh God—Client privilege…" Donaldson's voice rose up three decibels, then faltered.

"Mr. Donaldson," Bruno said, his damaged mouth made it difficult for him to get the words out, but they came, strung together weirdly. "You should tell this guy. He doesn't care about laws. He will kill all of us, and shrug it off."

Donaldson glared at Bruno. The question would have been: are you on his side? Donaldson turned his gaze back to London.

"I see why you hired Bruno," London said. "Smart man."

"Tom Holt hired us… to take care of the situation. We do not want you looking into that arson."

"Retired Police Chief Tom Holt?"

"Mhhmmm. The one and same," Donaldson

chuckled. "Highly decorated…"

"I don't have to look into it now," London said. "Police let the Knowles boys go."

"Ah. Yes," Donaldson nodded. "I was informed of that. I tried to call Bruno on his cell phone to stop this… whatever it was… became. He did not answer."

"Too bad for Bruno. Okay, Donaldson. You can go. As a matter of fact all of you can go."

"That's it?" Donaldson asked.

"You want it to be more?" London countered.

"Oh," Donaldson cleared his voice. "No. No, of course not."

London opened the door. "Okay. Now, all of you get the fuck out of here."

***

Later that night, Donaldson called London, asked him to come to his office. London was in a good mood and wanted to mess with somebody. Plus, Donaldson said he had a small job for London to do for a couple G's.

London took a scrap of paper from his front jean pocket, checked the address. He saw a small brick building in between the satellite company and the florist. He walked up to the screen door opened it and then opened the front door that needed a good paint job. Huge. Name plate that hung above the door caught London's eye. The D in Donaldson was huge. Not only that, but a bug was squashed in the middle of the letter, making it look more like an eight.

London went inside and found a messy desk in the lobby and no secretary. He looked around. Not much in the small office. The walls were piss-stained yellow, and the photos on the wall were of Donaldson fake-smiling and shaking a client's hand. In every photo the client either had

disdain for Donaldson or they had just had medical attention of some sort. One photo even looked like the man was in a coma, and Donaldson was making the man shake his hand.

London heard panting and a woman urging someone to go faster, harder. London decided to let Donaldson finish. After ten minutes, a secretary with short reddish-blonde hair and coke-bottle glasses rushed out, still straightening her skirt. She gasped when she saw London. She forced a smiled and pointed.

"Barry London, right?" The Secretary giggled.

"Right," London shrugged apologetically. "I hope I'm not interrupting…"

"Oh!" The secretary laughed and shook her head. "Just going over some documents."

"Mhhm. I bet," London said. "Is Donaldson free?"

"Oh. Yes. Of course," The Secretary laughed nervously. "I mean, he called you. Go right in," she opened the door for London.

He stepped passed her, looked her up and down. "You're a very nice young lady. I like that blouse, even if its inside out."

The Secretary cupped her breasts, looked down. She realized not only the blouse was inside out, but she'd forgotten to put her bra back on and her nipples were showing through the material. The Secretary gave London a cool look. She marched off to the restroom. London laughed.

He stepped inside the office to see Donaldson sitting at his desk, smoking a cigar and a satisfied expression on his fat round face.

"Barry. Come in, come in," Donaldson said.

"I sure will," London sat down. He noticed the office hadn't been cleaned in years. Books were scattered everywhere and papers littered Donaldson's desk. The only

thing that looked half-way decent was the trash can, which was rarely used because the trash ended up under Donaldson's desk.

'What's the fucking job," London said point blank.

"I got this guy I need followed. He's the husband of a client of mine. I need you to find out what he's doing on his nights off," Donaldson said.

"A divorce case?"

"Well… yeah," Donaldson chuckled. "I'm a lawyer. What do you think this was going to be?"

"A muscle job."

"It could be. This guy is a real douche. Been fucking everything in town. My client…she's a good woman. Donated her entire life to raising a family. Even the kids that aren't hers, but they're his," Donaldson glared at London. "Come on. I'm giving you three grand to do this."

"Something illegal or you'd have one of your boys to do it," London said.

"I don't think so," Donaldson scoffed. "Even if it wasn't illegal. You saw how they handled you. So what'll it be sailor?"

London sighed. "Okay. Got a picture and where does he work."

Donaldson handed a photo of a man with short brown hair, chiseled chin and bug eyes. The photo was taken while the man was on vacation. He was wearing a polo shirt and khaki shorts. The sign behind him informed the photographer the scene was in Bush Gardens.

"Easy-peasy. Nothing to this job," Donaldson said.

"So you say," London walked out of Donaldson's office, stopped at the door and turned to the secretary. He placed a finger over his mouth and said, "Shhhhh…Your secret is safe with me."

***

London followed the man to the grocery store. The door opened automatically and inside the foyer were three kids skating. London walked passed them, each boy eyeing him to make sure he wasn't a Dime store detective. He entered the store, saw his mark over in the produce. The man had the handles small handbasket over his wrist, picking through grapes. Someone who sounded like they needed a few more hours of sleep was announcing the sales of the week over the intercom.

London pretended to shop in the canned meat display, tossing a can in his shopping cart. Next they were in the meat department. The man dropped two packages of steaks in his basket, when he happened to notice London. He watched London touch every package of fresh fish, pick one up, then decide not to put any in his cart. They locked eyes, and the scowl on London's face made the man stare at a Hot dog bun display.

London followed the man to Dairy aisle, where he grabbed a cheese tray. He noticed the man's pace had picked up. By the time they were in the wine section, a manager started watching London. London purposely pushed his cart into a wine display. Six bottle of red wine fell to the floor, all of them busted on impact. A river of Red wine formed quickly on the shiny floor. The manager ran to a register and grabbed a microphone. He announced in a hurried voice there was a spill in the wine section.

As soon as the manger disappeared, London headed for the front door. He walked out to the parking lot and stood by the white Prius he stole when he left Donaldson's office. The man came out of the grocery store with three plastic bags in his hands. He hopped into a Toyota truck and sped off. London jumped into the Prius and followed the

man to a stoplight on Jefferson. When the light turned green, the man drove toward Hoover Bank and turned left on Garrison Ave.

London parked the car across the street. He watched the man use a key to enter a house. A woman walked past a window with blinds tilted slightly open. When the man opened the door, slender white arms and a head of curly blonde hair appeared in the doorway. London further noticed the woman was completely naked.

The woman grabbed the man by his shirt and pulled him inside. The bags of groceries fell in the threshold. The woman scooped the bags up and then the door was slammed shut. London sat out there, watching the house for hours. He played with the radio, passing through Classic Rock stations, finding nothing but Springsteen songs, one after the other. He tried country stations and it was Garth Brooks songs on every station. He skipped the pop stations. Modern music annoyed London more than any other music. The old school rap that Pop had an album of wasn't too bad. Pop's son gave him that, and Pop hated the music. So he gave it to London. Now London had three records in his collection.

The rap album collection from the early 80's, A Dean Martin greatest hits, and the Essential Glenn Campbell. The few women he's let in his small squalid hovel, has laughed at owning Glenn Campbell music. London didn't understand that. He loved Glenn Campbell's voice and always thought the man was a talented guitar player. London especially loved Gentle on my mind.

Suddenly, there was tapping on the car window. Startled, London jumped slightly, placed his hand on the Glock in his belt under his shirt. It was a Cop. Smiling with two buck teeth ready to bite a hole in the car door. London pressed a button and the electric windows rolled down. London smiled back, saluted the Cop.

"Hey buddy," the Cop said, slobber running down his chin. "You okay?"

"I'm fine Officer. Why do you ask?" London was chipper, had pep in his voice.

"You've been sitting here for a very long time. You aren't sick or anything?"

"No sir…well…I'm a little tired. I just drove from Florida up here to see a friend. I pulled over to rest."

"You know there's rest areas for that?"

"I know officer. I know. I wanted to get here fast," London said. "My friend's daughter had her first baby…" London chuckled. "I got lost, you see…"

"Maybe I can help you out, buddy. What's the address?"

"Horseshoe Lane. 677." London squinted to think. "Yep. 677 Horseshoe lane, Buckwald…"

"Jesus Christ!" The Officer exclaimed. "You're in Gemma city, pal. You want to go to Falmouth County. Just take route 29."

"Oh! Thanks, Officer. Look, I'm still pretty tired…"

"Tell you what," the Officer smiled, exhaled deeply. "I'll give you two more hours. If you're still here, I'll escort you to a hotel."

"That's very nice of you," London said. "Thank you sir. Actually, I'm going to go to a hotel right now."

"Okay, buddy. Good decision," the Officer said.

London started the car, put it in gear and slowly drove away from the curb. He waved to the cop as he left the cul-de-sac. He rode to the nearest hotel just as bypass turned into a two lane. Sunnydale Rest Easy was the name of the hotel. London pulled into a parking space in front of the office and the cop rode by, waved to London. London waved back, waited until he saw the backend of the cop car, and went back to the cul-de- sac.

By 10.30pm, London was sick of watching this guy's house. Just as he was ready to call it quits, London saw the blonde leave the man's house. She was running and buttoning her blouse until she grew frustrated with the situation and decided to show the world her black lace brassiere. At closer look, the blonde was Shelly Hope. Billy's sister. She jumped into a blue 2013 Mustang with a dark haired woman at the wheel. The Mustang sped off in a hurry.

London was mystified. Shelly Hope. He hadn't seen her in years and why did he see her fleeing the house of a man he had under surveillance.

London decided to see what the man was up to. He knew he shouldn't, but hell, the guy hadn't been seen in hours. London snuck through some bushes that led around back. He noticed the backdoor was open. London went inside.

The backdoor led to the kitchen, which was pristine, very clean, except for brown liquid, beer he guessed, and broken glass on the tiled floor. Further inside, toward the hallway that led to the dining room, the body of a man laid dead in between two chairs. It was the man he'd been watching. Some pictures hung on the wall in the dining room. Pictures of the man and his family. Pictures of the man graduating police academy. A framed picture of a newspaper clipping and photo of the man becoming Sheriff of Loughlin County.

"Sheriff Thomas Galveston," London whispered.

London got the hell out of there.

***

London watched Donaldson leave his office. A few minutes before, the secretary left by the backdoor. She hopped into a jeep Wrangler and slowly drove off as if she were sneaking

downstairs without waking her parents. London let her go without molestation. He didn't care about her. Just Donaldson.

Donaldson drunkenly swayed to his BMW. He chuckled to himself as he unlocked the door. "Hmmm… Nice piece… of ass," he said, pulled the door handle. Donaldson felt pressure around his Adams apple. Air to his lungs was cut off as London's forearms wrapped around Donaldson's neck. Donaldson stumbled backwards, felt light-headed. He didn't fight it. He passed out in London's arms.

***

They were in Donaldson's office.

The air conditioner must've been running continuously. The room was ice cold. Donaldson was sitting behind his desk, passed out. London stood to the right of the desk, a few inches from Donaldson. He wasn't going to like what London was about to do.

London threw an ice bucket full of melted ice water on Donaldson's face. Donaldson jumped from his chair and gasped. He acted stunned to the point he staggered from side to side, and prayed to Jesus to make sure he wasn't dead.

London laughed. "I think even Jesus hates you enough not to have you die, Donaldson. He'd rather wait to let the Devil take you than take that stink up to Heaven with your nasty, fat ass."

"You-you did this!" Donaldson strained every muscle in his beady eyes to look at the wet suit he was wearing.

"Who the fuck else would care enough to do it?" London informed him.

"This… this an expensive suit! Now it will shrink!"

London punched Donaldson in the mouth. The fat man staggered, fell to his knees. Blood drained from his bruised bottom lip. London stood over Donaldson, his hand on the Glock in his belt. He wanted to shoot him. He thought better. That line of action could cause the great wall of Jericho to crumble, and a lot of people depend on London staying out of a penitentiary these days.

"You tried to set me up!" London screamed.

"No, no," Donaldson begged. "I swear to you! I wouldn't do that…." He blubbered. Tears came easy to Donaldson. So did begging. He learned to beg, cry, and tell his bullies anything they wanted to hear as long as they didn't hurt him. He learned that years ago in middle school.

London pulled the Glock from his belt and stuck the muzzle in Donaldson's left nostril. To London's surprise, it almost fit.

"I know it now," London said calmly, holding back the anger. "You were trying to set me up. That fella you had me follow," London shook his head. "He was a cop."

"Huh? Look. All I know was a woman came in here…"

"Not just a cop, fat-ass. He was the fucking Sheriff of Loughlin County!"

Donaldson looked away, thought about this. "What do you mean 'was'?"

"I mean deceased. Perished. As of… no more. A mother fucking stiff!"

"All I know, is, this woman…"

"What woman!?"

"Veronica Golden. Okay. That's the name I was given…"

"What'd she look like?"

Donaldson shrugged. "Blonde," he said. "Blonde curly hair. She was hot. Okay?"

"Why me?"

"I don't know… look I didn't want to use any of my regulars. I thought… I thought I'd pass a few bucks your way to make up for earlier." Donaldson tried to smile. "She hired me to have one of my guys to do something with that man. Said he was about to be an ex and she needed dirt on him… ohhhh… shit…"

London smacked Donaldson with the butt of his gun. Donaldson flinched. Now his upper lip started to bleed.

"You're lying," London said. "How can you be a lawyer and not know the cops here? Especially in Gemma City or Loughlin County. You better lay some truth on me, buddy. Or I'll shoot you and drop your body where that dead Sheriff is."

"Honestly. I don't know the woman. Okay…I knew he was the Sheriff. I knew he was cheating on his wife. I didn't know he would end up dead."

"What's the game, huh? Blackmailing a Sheriff for…"

Donaldson cut him off. "For my secretary! She asked me to help out a friend of hers. That curly blonde haired woman…"

London was sick of it.

He put the Glock back in his belt. Showed Donaldson his hands as if to say, I wash my hands of the whole matter. He didn't care why anymore. All London knew was the scam didn't work. He wasn't taking the fall for the dead Sheriff. But he was curious why Shelly Hope wanted a fellow cop dead.

"I'll be back, maybe," London said. "Hey, if you smell smoke… go ahead and ask Jesus again not to make you dead."

London left Donaldson scared and crying, locked in the closet.

6

London made a call to Peter Choaladi, who acts as sort of an agent to lend London out to other mob bosses who might have a problem that needs fixing. He filled Choaladi in on everything, then he asked to speak to Pop. The man was a wealth of information. What he didn't know, the eighty- one year old black man from Manhattan, could find out anything. He'd even find out who was the President of the United States mistress. Pop drove a bus for thirty years and got to know quite a few people. He had contacts as far as Tokyo and as high up as Senator Bob Devlin from North Dakota. Now Pop runs Choaladi's bookstore on 54th street, which also doubles as a bookie operation.

"Pop," London said cheerfully. "How's the game?" That was their code for how things were on the street, sometimes referring betting week.

His real name is Leon Brown, but Pop loved the nickname given to him by Choaladi. Choaladi meant it as in 'Old-timer' who really didn't have much to do except take bets. It had taken on a different meaning with London. Pop missed his real sons, and hearing London call him that gave him respect, and a purpose to give out wise counsel. Both sons were in the army and stationed in Germany. They only called him once a month.

Code was used on the phone years ago. Now with burn phones, you didn't necessarily have to use code, but Pop was stuck in his ways and he was concerned more than even Choaladi, in case someone outside the family "is listening in, Son."

"Son," Pop said cheerfully. "Getting our asses handed to us in the first two quarters, then turned things

around in the third and rallied twenty-two points to win it big in the fourth!" Pop laughed. "What about you, son? How's life, work, and family?"

Code for what are you up to.

"Life is life, looking for balance, and the wife has the kids while I'm tending to apple store," London said.

Code for on a job not for Choaladi, but I still need some info.

"Son, I have another call. Can I call you back in five?" Pop grinned as he shrugged at an impatient fat man in a baggy jogging suit. Pop hung up after London said yes. The fat man looked at his watch and sighed. "Sorry Horace, be another twenty minutes before we can resume business. Browse for a book or a DVD. Might I suggest a low carb diet book?"

The fat man rolled his eyes and said, "Fucking prick."

Choaladi laughed as his eyes lifted from the pages of a paperback and over to the fat man. He was sitting in a corner on a black sofa reading Get Shorty. A few minutes before, Choaladi's concentration was cut short when he recognized Pop's code.

Pop removed himself from the register, and walked toward the office. He dialed London's number on his flip phone. London answered right away.

"What do you need, Barry?" Pop said, slammed the office door.

"I need some info on a retired cop. His name is Tom Holt."

Pop was stunned. "You're keeping company with cops now, son?"

"I actually had a run in with the prick when I was a teenager. Public lewdness in the park." London said.

That was code for being busted for selling stolen cartons of cigarettes.

"You don't need to use code, son. I'm on the cell."

"No," London said. "Seriously, Pop. I was taking a piss on a tree and the fucker busted me."

"Tell you what, give me an hour and I'll call you back. I got a guy who knows all the cops in Jersey."

"Thanks Pop."

"Sure thing son."

7

London decided to walk to Billy's house since the neighborhood is only a block away. He was only a few links away from the hotel when a cop car pulled up beside him. The lights on top of the cruiser flashed and the siren blared for five seconds. The cruiser rolled up on the sidewalk and was parked catty-cornered. The engine shutoff and the officer jumped out of the driver's seat, demanding London stay still and assume the position, hands against the wall of a post office and spread his legs.

London complied, said nothing until he realized the officer was Billy's sister. Shelly still looked good, especially in that leather coat and black pants suit. Her long blond hair was up in a ponytail, but some strands on her forehead had come lose and the wind was blowing them in her eyes. She had Carol Monroe with her, a new, more aggressive partner, who was actually the one barking orders at London, then moved on to frisking him.

"Okay sweetheart, what's this for?" Monroe said, pretending to be a Wild West gunslinger. The man always knew how to annoy others. He was small, very thin, and very effeminate. When anyone would point out how unmanly Monroe was, his Chihuahua attitude would turn Pitbull.

"Rabbit huntin'," London said.

"You don't look like much of a hunter," Monroe said.

"Oh, I get my share of pelts."

"I hate to break this to you…" Monroe read the name from London's I.D. and giggled. "Barry… London…? You need a permit to carry a weapon…"

"Give him back his gun, Monroe," Shelly said.

"Wait, we were told…"

"Officer Monroe!" Shelly barked. Monroe stopped talking. "Give him back his gun."

"Yes ma'am," a voice squeaked out of Monroe's red pursed lips.

"You can take the car. Head back to the station. I think I might head into Wilco Joe's for a drink." Shelly ordered.

"Anything you say Lieutenant." Monroe zipped to the cruiser as if he had rockets under his shoes. He got into the cruiser, slammed the door angrily and sped off.

"Where'd you get him? St. Ives?" London said.

"Nope," Shelly said. "He graduated first in his class at Police Academy. Besides, male prostitutes don't work out of St. Ives anymore. That warehouse shut down a long time ago. Come on, I'll buy you a drink." Shelly started to walk and London followed her. Just around the corner and they hit Wilco Joe's. A band of people, mostly college students, exited the building loudly until they saw Shelly and quietly walked the opposite direction.

"Been a few years since I've been here. If you haven't noticed," London said.

"Oh, believe me," Shelly held the door open for London. "I've noticed."

That statement confused London. Was it a compliment…?

They took a booth in the back of the bar. A waitress immediately took their order. London just ordered a Lager. Shelly ordered a double whiskey. London remembered Shelly as being a teetotaller. He never pushed for her to drink, but her friends and his always did.

"Surprised I drink?" She asked, raised an eyebrow.

"I am," London shrugged. "But I also know people change. I remember your family history."

"Yeah," Shelly thanked the waitress when she brought their drinks. She paid the woman and told the older woman with two front teeth missing, they may order more. "You don't have to remind me both my parents were drunks."

"Not reminding you," London said, drank his beer sloppily and then wiped his mouth. "Just more like post-it note to help you keep tabs on any…ill-behavior you might run up on."

"Fucking hood trying to be a psychiatrist. Doing bad trying to be a do-gooder."

"Never make that mistake," London told her. "Just a hood. And I will always do what I have to, good or bad, in my own interest."

"Barry, I have to warn you," Shelly finished off her glass. She held it up so the waitress could see she wanted another. The waitress gave her a thumbs up. "This town, this fucking town—Gemma—is not what it used to be."

"Oh? How so?" London asked. He drank more of his Lager, really just nursing it.

A patrolman walked over. He towered over London and Shelly. He was very tall, barrel chested, but had a gut that hung over his belt and skinny knobby knees. He was proud of his muscles which was why he had his shirt sleeves rolled up. His name was Fred Converse and he had a very thick Jersey accent that went along with that booming voice he always used to intimidate.

London noticed another Officer was very interested in what was going on. This Officer wore a Loughlin County uniform and a bushy handle bar mustache. He sat at a table on the far left. A waitress handed the county cop a Schlitz. He thanked her. She said "Sure, Officer Hornsby." She wiggled her ass and turned back, smiled at him. Hornsby's gaze never left the scene between Converse and London.

Converse leaned in to London and said, "Hey bud, you're sitting at my table."

"Nope," London said, not looking at the man, keeping his eyes forward.

"Nope? That's all you have to say? If you don't leave, I'll be forced to haul you in for disturbing the peace, public drunkenness, and worse of all, assaulting a police officer."

"Stand down, Officer Converse," Shelly barked.

"With all due respect, Lt. I don't take orders from you," Converse laughed. "Or have you forgotten how things work in Gemma?"

"It may cost me, but I can take your badge and gun for this…"

Converse laughed again. "Come on, Shelly! You know nobody takes you serious. Anyway I am just talking to your friend here. Some advice bud. Don't look into that fire, eh?"

"Nope," London said again.

"What the fuck? Is his brain broken…?"

London brought the beer glass hard across Converse's face in one smooth motion. The glass shattered in three parts. One long jagged piece embedded deep into Converse's cheekbone. Another piece exploded on contact and entered the man's right eyes. Converse screamed. He threw both hands up to cover his face as he fell to his knees.

London elbowed Converse in the chest, sending him backwards, falling through a couple of chairs, and landing on his back. London jumped from his chair and drew his Glock, showed it to the gathering crowd of cops. Shelly trotted over, got in between London and the crowd.

"Back off!" She screamed. "All of you! That's an order!" She looked behind her and said to London: "You better leave."

"Yeah, I think the next time we get a drink it will be

a beer from Chopper's, instead of marching with this shit parade."

"Sorry, Barry," Shelly fired back. "There won't be a next time."

Before London left, he leaned in to Converse. "Nope," he said to Converse, who was moaning because of the glass in his face and struggling to catch his breath. "My brain ain't broken!"

8

Deep Purple was blaring from Billy Hope's front yard.

"Barry," Billy called out. He was at the grill, wearing a white smock with grease stains across a cartoon character giving thumbs up. London stepped into the freshly mowed grass and stood there. He saw the whole family was there, including Billy's father in law, retired police officer Tom Holt. "You made it!" Billy was ecstatic. He screamed London's name a few more times and ordered him to come into the yard and have a beer. London was busy staring down Holt, who was doing the same.

Pop had caught London on the emergency cell London carried. Pop filled London in about Holt. He warned London about Holt, and made it a point to tell London to watch his back.

"Nothing worse than a crooked cop, son," Pop said. "More dangerous than any street hood or made guy with power." Pop was right.

London walked up, forced a fake smile. He shook Billy's hand and accepted a can of Modelo. It was cold, and went down easy. Still, London disliked the after taste. He preferred Michelob Dark on hot days.

"What can I get you to eat, my man? A burger or a dog?"

"Dog," London said. "Mustard, drown it in relish."

"You got it," Billy fixed the hot dog quickly, carefully placed it on a paper plate. He offered chips, London declined. Billy saw his wife come out of the sliding door on the deck of their house. Billy called out to her. "Look who's here, Sam!" He pointed at London and laughed giddily.

London took a bite of the hot dog, looked up, and

saw Holt was still staring at him with discontent.

Samantha stood there a second, hands on her hips, smiling. She waved to London and he nodded. She made her way to him, stopped again, and folded her arms as to tell London she was pleased to see him, although it was uncomfortable.

"Hello, Sam," London said as he finished off his hot dog.

"Hello, Barry," she laughed, reached over to the plastic plates, silverware and snatched a napkin. She wiped relish from London's chin. "Still the same Barry London," Samantha said.

"How so?" London inquired.

"You still need a woman to look after you."

"Ah," London threw his plate into the trashcan by the grill, gulped down more Modelo. "You're not available," he told her. "Still not available."

Samantha laughed. "Oh please. Who wants a thirty-eight year old mother of two boys?"

"Apparently this guy does," London jabbed a thumb Billy's direction.

"Damn straight," Billy flipped some burgers on the grill and smoke rose up, then vanished quickly.

"By the way, where are the boys?" London looked around the yard.

"They're in the house playing music," Samantha said.

"If you can call that music. Shit, I tried to get them into Bon Jovi…" Billy tried to explain, London cut him off.

"You call that music? The fuck is wrong with you, Billy." London drained the rest of the beer from his can and tossed it into the trash can beside the grill. "I'm gonna go inside and say hello. Haven't seen them since they were young'uns."

"Sure, Barry," Samantha patted London on the back.

"They'll be glad to see you. Just follow the badly played bass and guitar." Samantha laughed.

London followed the oddly placed bass notes with the twangy, sometimes wah-wah-peddle guitar sounds all the way upstairs to a nicely furnished Den. Bookshelves surrounded the room, filled with old hardbacks. Beautiful vases were appropriately placed on end tables, bookshelf and an old TV/Stereo from the early 1960's. A loveseat and several suede chairs were moved to the back of the room so the boys could have room for their amps. London stood in the doorway and listened, his arms folded, a half smile on his lips. Technically they were still wet behind the ears. But they had passion for what they were playing. To London, it kind of sounded like Rick James and the sort of country music Pop was always playing. To note also, Pop played a Rick James album for London and said he liked his bass playing, not his voice.

Donnie was on bass. Ricky on guitar. They stopped playing, stared blankly at London.

"Can we help you, Mister?" Donnie said, stone-faced.

Ricky leaned in and whispered, "Who the hell is he?"

"I don't fuckin' know!" Donnie scoffed.

London walked in the den, smiling. He nodded as he walked in circles looking at the equipment.

"Hey," Ricky said. "If you're thinking of taking our stuff, you better watch out!"

"Yeah!" Donnie backed him up. "You don't know who our grandfather is! He'll fuck you up!"

London laughed. "I know who he is. The question is: do you know who I am?"

They exchanged brief confused looks.

"No," Ricky said.

Donnie sighed. "Look, we did what we were asked

to do. So get the hell out of here!"

"You did what you were asked to do, huh?" London nodded.

"Well… yeah!" Ricky exerted. "God! You saw the results!"

London smiled at them. "No. I didn't see the results. Was it satisfactory?"

They exchanged confused looks again.

"Hey… who are you, mister?" Donnie asked.

"Barry London."

"We don't know you," Ricky said.

"You do," London touched Ricky's amp. "This thing can get loud right?"

"Yeah," Ricky told him. "How do we know you?"

"Well, I saw you both when you were born. I've known your dad, your mom, your stepdad and your grandfather since I was nine. Last time I saw you fellas was at your dad's funeral."

"Okay. And now you want to take our stuff? You're a collector for…" Donnie stopped talking. He eyed London for a bit.

"Go on," London encouraged him. "You can speak freely in front of me. I'm no cop."

"That's kinda good," Ricky shrugged. "We're actually not fond of them."

"You see," London began. "Billy, your stepdad, he asked me to initially look into the thing you did. He said he didn't believe you set that fire. You two just admitted to me you did do it. Wait… I'm not judging… hear me out. Some odd things have happened to me since he asked me to do this. You were cleared. Okay. I have people who don't even want me in town. So… now I'm involved, I'm on your side. Who asked you to burn down the Coffin Hop?"

"We didn't burn it down," Donnie said.

"Tell him, Donnie," Ricky moaned. "I believe he's here to help us."

"I'm not admitting to anything, Ricky!"

"Listen to me," London stepped in. "Because of this deed, whether you did it or not, just the rumor that you two burned down the club, could lead to terrible things. Your parents cannot protect you two."

"But you can," Ricky said.

"Not forever," London told him.

"Who the hell let you in my house?" Holt stood in the hallway.

The echo of a flush came from behind him and the odor was much worse if anyone had been standing next to short, stout man with the thinning grey crew cut. He had his hands on his hip, his left fixed as if they were feeling for his regulation weapon that hadn't been on his belt for years.

"Grandpa…..how long were you standing there?" Donnie's voice broke as if he were going through puberty a second time. Both of the boys were scared, trembling. Ricky was looking down, nervously shuffling his feet.

"Long enough!" Holt barked.

"Your house? I thought this humble hovel belonged to the late Gavin Knowles," London said.

"Who the fuck do you think paid for it? That bum got himself killed before he could pay for a cup of coffee from Marie's Cavern."

"That's real nice talk, Holt. About a dead man and in front of his sons."

"I don't like bums and I sure as hell don't like hoods in my house."

"I bet you like yourself, though."

"What do you mean by that?" Holt stepped inside the den, ready to tango. All the pent-up frustrations of not abusing his power came out in one line of dialogue and body

language.

"Careful, Officer Holt," London smirked. "Your pretend gun might go off and shoot yourself in the foot."

Holt took a few more steps toward London. He stopped, thought about his actions. The boys were so frightened, they ran to the hallway, brushing Holt. London laughed. Shook his head.

"You ain't changed, Officer Holt. Just your age, and mental capacity has depleted some," London said. His eyes moved to the boys, smiled hugely. He walked past Holt and in the hallway, dividing the boys. "I think I've worn out my welcome mat, here."

9

London was sleeping hard when his phone rang. He rolled over, looked at the number on flip phone. It was Pop.

"Yeah?"

"Son, this is Pop."

London laughed. Pop always answered the same way. Didn't he know that his name and number shows on the phone's screen? That tickled London.

"What's up, Pop?"

"Get out of Gemma, fast," Pop's voice wasn't as cheerful as it usually was.

"I can't," London yawned. "My car isn't fixed." Strange. First time Pop had ever been worried about his safety, or at least expressed it.

"Son, Choaladi can send someone to pick it up when it's ready," Pop said. "You don't want to be in Gemma at all. There's a war going on."

"Pop, there's always a war going on between turf holders…"

"No, you don't understand, Barry. The war is between Cops."

"Explain that, Pop."

"Gemma city cops and cops in Loughlin County are not getting along, Barry. Apparently, a county cop has been targeting certain businesses that pay off Gemma city cops. If there isn't a payment made, either the business owner or his loved ones get hurt; or that building gets burned down. In the last year, four businesses have burned down. Two restaurants and two clubs. Mickey's Meatball Palace, The cavern bar, Egg Foo Kings, and the Coffin Hop."

London clucked his tongue. "Yeah, Pop. I know about the coffin Hop. How does Holt fit in to all of this?"

"Who do you think controls the county cops?"

"Wait, Pop. That makes no sense. Holt was a Chief of police in the Gemma city."

"Son," Pop chuckled. "City forced Holt to retire. I'm just telling you what I heard."

"Why'd they do that?"

"Tom Holt liked the girls too much. Most were under the age of eighteen. A reporter got wind of his after-hours activities. A lot of it contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

London laughed. "Holy shit!"

"I also heard Choaladi sent you there on Holt's request."

"He did," London said. "When he saw me in his daughter's house, he wasn't friendly. I take it he was doing it for show."

"I'm not so sure, son," Pop said. "I also heard he has early stages of dementia."

"Fuck," London sighed. "That could be dangerous."

"Son, be careful."

"I will, Pop. You stay out of trouble and keep a watchful eye on the boss."

"Well, as far as trouble goes, I am always cautious, as is Peter Choaladi. Holler if you need anything else."

Pop hung up.

London tossed the burner phone on the nightstand. He moved his legs around and sat on the edge of the bed. He took a cigarette from the pack lying on the floor. He lit it, took a long drag. The toilet flushed and the light turned off. The bathroom door swung open and Shelly came out, adjusting her panties. Her breasts were illuminated by the light in the room, which was a low bulb burning in the lamp

on the nightstand.

"Hope that call wasn't bad news," she said, sat on the bed next to London. Shelly rubbed his shoulder, stopped, and kept her hand there. "Hey, this hotel is cleaner than I thought." She kissed London's neck. He didn't respond to her, and she removed her hand from his shoulder.

London was quiet. He lowered his head as he took another drag.

"You want me to go?"

London shrugged.

"Okay," Shelly reached for her bra and blouse. London grabbed her hand, shook the clothes from it. Shelly sighed. "Make up your fucking mind!" She laid down, angrily pulled the covers over her.

London smiled to himself, turned the lamp off.

"I always do," he said, laid beside her.

"Don't fuck with me, London," Shelly said. 'You know I have a gun."

"And handcuffs," London moved them from under his pillow. They rattled as if a ghost entered room.

Shelly sighed. "Use them again," she whispered. "I like it."

10

The next day, London was walking by the Thrill Kill bar and grill, when he saw one of Donaldson's men nursing a beer at the bar. He was the only one in the place that resembled a TGIF's, only more rundown. In the back, looked like someone had been at a table, and the wait staff decided not to clean up the empty bottles of Bud light and messy plates of wings. London decided he could use a beer. London sat next to the man with long oily hair. He was in a dirty T-shirt promoting the use of Marijuana and cargo shorts. He smelled like he'd just burned one. The man was off in his own little world, staring at his reflection in the mirror behind the bartender.

The bartender greeted London and asked what he could get him. London ordered a Pabst Blue Ribbon, threw down a twenty. The bartender poured the Pabst in a tall glass, the head overflowing. He set the glass down, and scooped up the twenty. In a few seconds, he brought London his change.

Donaldson's man didn't notice London for a while. When he did, he jumped as if he just walked up on a snake.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Having a beer," London told the man. "Is that all right with you?"

They sat in awkward silence or a bit more until the man spoke up.

"I'm sorry about yesterday."

London drank some more of the Pabst. He licked his lips and said, "What's your name?"

"Willy Snyder," the man said in a depressed voice.

"You don't sound happy that you're Willy Snyder."

"At the moment, I'm not," he answered, ordered another Miller. The bartender brought another bottle. Willy reached in his pocket to pay and London stopped him.

"It's on me," London said. "You were about to tell the world about a disc until Donaldson stopped you. What was that all about?"

"It's about to get me killed," Willy drained the bottle, slammed it down on the counter.

"You don't you think you're being paranoid? Donaldson doesn't strike me as the violent type."

"He's not," Willy sniffed. "The people he works for is."

"Tell you what," London said. "I'll protect you, if you tell me about the disc."

"That's no guarantee."

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

"Mister, we're not talking about some outfit…"

"I already know who you're afraid of," London said. "Tom Holt."

Willy glared at London. "You get me out of town, and I'll tell you what's on it."

London laughed, shook his head. "You tell me now, I won't blow your balls off in front of the bartender," London glared at Willy. Willy was genuinely frightened. London laughed again. He smacked Willy on the shoulder. "I'll get you out of town, but you have to tell me before we leave."

"W… when?"

"As soon as you tell me what's on the disc."

Willy chewed his bottom lip. He was hesitant, then made a decision he immediately regretted. "O… kay… I guess."

"Then go on!" London picked up a handful of cashews and tossed them at Willy. Willy threw up his hands

as if to ward off some horrible evil. London couldn't help but laugh.

"This disc," Willy began. "It has sensitive info stolen from an Army base. I don't have to tell you how much trouble I can get in just talking about it."

"What's on the disc, Willy?"

"Blackmail pics. Apparently, Holt's dead Son in-law found the disc years ago. Pics of some Army guys torturing Afghani's for info… wait… maybe it was the Marine homo orgy…? I don't know. No! It was the army killing innocent Afghani's. It's on a disc. I know what you're going to ask: why wasn't it on an encrypted thumbnail drive? Shit if I know. I just know… That disc went missing, for a number of years, in fact. The guy who stole it ran the Coffin Hop. He was making loads of money from that disc."

"Hmmm… is that a fact?" London said. "Who is this guy?"

"Xavier Cugat," Willy said, shook his head. "What the fuck kind of name is that? Only in America, huh?"

"What's this guy look like?"

Willy closed his eyes. Thought about it. "Kind of a big guy. Not fat, just out shape… about. I don't know… six two… always has his black hair slicked back. Real bad skin on his face, flakey. Oh yeah, he calls everyone my friend."

Mother fucker, London thought. That son of a bitch Georgy-boy Mavers came back from Canada.

London sighed. "You don't fuckin' say?"

"You know him?" Willy asked, concern on the tip of his tongue and paranoia running amok in his dancing eyes.

"More than likely. Getting' late, Willy. I'll take you to the depot."

"What? No airline?"

"Bus, asshole."

"Not even train? Shit!" Willy tossed a napkin at his

beer bottle.

"Don't push it, dickhead," London said. "You might be leavin' town via the river, with ten bricks attached to you."

"Okay, okay… bus is good."

"Fuckin'-A, it's good. Too damn good for you," London barked.

The door swung open. Two cops stood in the threshold of the Thrill kill. Looking like bulls searching for that red flag, they both stamped their hooves on the linoleum floor and blew hot steam from their nostrils. Converse and Hornsby were a Mutt and Jeff pairing. Converse was small, compact and hung his arms to the floor like an ape. Hornsby was tall, very lean except a pouch in the midsection and carried himself with dignity. For some reason Hornsby reminded London of a college professor he once had to lean on when he wouldn't pay Pop for a bet he made on the Super Bowl.

"Ohhhhhh! Be-you-tiful!!" Hornsby cried out. "The Gods are smiling on us, Converse!"

"Uh-oh," Willy began to hyperventilate. "I don't like the looks of this, London."

London scoffed. "Hmph! I think we'll be okay, Willy. I've been itchin' cure some bacon lately."

"Go easy on the insults," Willy trembled.

"You ladies on a date?" Converse snickered, smacked Hornsby on the shoulder.

"A little odd seeing you two together," London said. "I heard Gemma City and Loughlin County cops didn't like each other."

"To be honest," Hornsby said, stepping forward and unstrapping his nightstick from his belt. "We get along just fine."

Converse drew in a quick breath and released it slowly, nostrils flared, lips pursed. "We always unite to beat

the shit out of scum suckers like you two."

Converse rushed London, holding his nightstick high above his head. London crouched and pushed out his left shoulder and hip toward Converse, catching the man just as he came down with the black rubber club. The nightstick smacked London in the middle of his back and Converse flipped over, falling head- first on the floor.

Willy wasn't much of a fighter. He tried to throw a punch and it was weaker than watered down kool-ade. Hornsby grabbed Willy's arm and swung him around. Willy fell into a table knocked over a few chairs. One chair slid toward London. He grabbed the chair and slammed it on top of Converse's head. Converse fell fast and was temporarily out of commission.

Hornsby had Willy pinned down on the table, choking him out with his nightstick. London snatched Hornsby by the collar and tossed him to the floor. London kicked Hornsby in the face. A tooth popped out and blood splattered the floor. London wasn't done with Hornsby. He had a lot more pain to give to the pig. He reached down to pick Hornsby up, when he felt a chair slam against his back.

Splintered wood rained down on London and his attacker. All that did was make London even angrier. London growled, turned to Converse and wrapped his over-sized hands around Converse's neck. Converse went limp immediately, even though he tried to loosen London's grip. London felt Hornsby's nightstick jab him in the ribs. A lightning sensation traveled up and down London's midsection.

That was enough to make London pull his hands from Converse's throat. London dropped to his knees, and knowing that he was about to receive a double shot of nightstick to the head, he covered his neck and cranium with his hands. Sure enough, the hard rubber came down swift

and hard. After two or three times, London removed his hands and the nightsticks pounded the top and back of his skull.

London took it like a man.

He winced, forced himself not to let his aggressors know the beatings hurt. Out of the corner of his eyes, London noticed Willy took off. Instead of helping London, the weasel made sure his rubbery legs moved fast enough no one could catch him. Converse and Hornsby were so busy with London, they momentarily forgot Willy existed.

Converse grew tired of using his nightstick. He unsheathed his Glock and put the gun to London's temple. London by now was lying on his belly, going in and out of consciousness. Then a loud booming voice stopped Converse from pulling the trigger.

"What in blue blazes is going on here?!" Tom Holt bellowed.

11

"You caught us having a little fun, Mr. Holt," Converse chuckled. He wiped beads of sweat from his face with a limp hand. "You remember those days don't you?"

"You smart mouthin' me, boy?" Holt's deliverer was rapid fire. And in his younger days, he would've scared the bejesus and holly ghost out of anyone with those intense little black eyes. Now a days, those eyes just look tired and his jowls flapping around every time he moved, just made him into a sad joke.

Holt stepped up to Converse. He breathed irregularly, chest heaving slowly.

Converse tried to hide a smile. He looked down at his shoes, placed a hand on his forehead for a second. "No, sir," he swallowed a laugh. "I have nothing but respect for you former Police Chief Holt."

Holt turned quickly to Hornsby. Looked him up and down. He was dissatisfied with Hornsby.

"I'm surprised at you, Hornsby," Holt said. "I helped you get into the academy because I knew you had potential. You haven't forgotten why you became a police officer have you, Hornsby?"

Hornsby sighed. He considered the question. "No sir," Hornsby finally said. "I'm here to serve to and protect."

Holt shifted toward Converse again after he heard a snicker. "Something wrong, Officer Converse?"

Converse cleared his throat. He put on a serious face, straightened his poster.

"Not at all, former Police Chief Holt."

"You don't have to remind me that I am no longer Police Chief of Gemma City," Holt let an emotion slip by.

London caught it. However brief it was, regrets, sadness, wishing for the old days to parade through the streets, all of it flooded Holt at once. London felt bad for the old man. "I wake up to that fact every morning."

The barroom was intensely silent.

Then Holt snapped out of it and the prick of the old days rolled out in one glorious tongue lashing as he shifted his girth to London.

"You're a troublemaker, London. A real mixer. You always have been," Holt said. "We shouldn't let hoods like you in our city. You bring a bad smell my hometown."

"My hometown, too, Holt," London shot back. "Or have you forgotten?"

"Oh, no. Never. Your rap sheet reminds me your mother dropped you when she stood up from the toilet."

Converse had a case of the giggles hearing what Holt's comment. Holt cut his eyes at Converse. The merriment stopped immediately.

"Go ahead, old man, insult me all you want, but leave my mother out of this," London said. "You're angry because no one is afraid of you anymore. You think fear and respect are the same thing." London shook his head. "You almost made it to the top of the mountain. Almost. Hard to feel sorry for someone who craved power, and when you were knocked off that mountain, you fell hard. You just can't let it go."

Hornsby cleared his throat. Holt shifted toward him.

"Sir," Hornsby said in a low voice. "We have to go. There's a three fourteen in progress."

Holt fumbled his words, let his anger mete drop from eleven to six. He nodded to Hornsby and Converse. "Go head!" He barked. Holt wagged a finger in Converse's face, then moved the finger to show the damage in the bar. "None of this, okay? Unless it's absolutely necessary…

which is rare. Understand?"

Converse swallowed another series of giggles, and said: "Oh, yes sir. We've learned our lesson. Yes sir."

They shuffled out the door as quickly as they could, Converse first, Hornsby nearly stepping on his heels.

"I stayed away from Gemma City for nearly ten years," London said. "I swore I'd never come back here."

Holt nodded. "I know."

London turned a chair around, sat down. He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He took a drag and released the smoke slowly. "I could have taken the Cougar anywhere to be fixed. I said I'd never come back here, and I fuckin' meant it."

"You said that at Gavin's funeral," Holt said. I had no idea you worked for Choaladi. Furthermore, I didn't know he would send you when I asked for help."

"Alright, Holt, what's the rumpus? And why did you send those guys after me?"

"What guys?" Holt acted surprised. "I don't need to send anyone to do my dirty work…"

"Cut the shit, old man!" London thundered. "When I first got into town, your lawyer Paul Donaldson and some girl scouts tried to strong arm me into not looking into that fire at the Coffin Hop."

Holt laughed. "Paul Donaldson is my lawyer. That's a sick joke." Holt sat a chair upright and sat at a table. London scooted his chair to that table and glared at Holt as he drained all the life from his cigarette. "Hey! Chubby!" Holt called out.

A small Mexican man appeared from the kitchen entrance, making sure the violence was over with and he was not in any danger. "Yes, Mr. Holt?"

"Bring me and my friend a pitcher of beer and three plates of those flamin' hot wings."

"Right away, Mr. Holt," and the small, compact Mexican dipped back in the kitchen swiftly.

"I don't like wings," London said.

"I didn't order for you," Holt snapped.

"Why is it a sick joke Donaldson is your lawyer?"

"I've done battle with that moron for more than half of our careers."

Chubby brought three plates of wings and a huge bowl of blue cheese dressing. He sat them in front of Holt and pulled back his hands as if he were afraid Holt was going to eat them as well. Thirty seconds later, a very attractive, yet plump, Mexican woman with extremely large breasts falling out of her dress, brought the pitcher of beer. She smiled at London and he raised his eyebrows at her playfully. She swished her hips as she peddled back into the kitchen, looking back at London and giving him another salacious smile.

"I… uh… wonder if I can speak for a moment," Chubby said to Holt. Holt waved a bright orange stained finger as he tore meat from another small drumstick and chewed ferociously. Chubby nervously continued. "Please, Mr. Holt. Could you talk to your officers about fighting in my bar? They are destroying it too much…only the other day they fought another man…only…he was not as lucky as your friend here."

"How was this man unlucky?" London asked.

"He was killed," Chubby said. "Five policeman beat him to death. See!" He pointed to the hallway that led to an area for a pool hall. "I had to throw that rug there to cover the man's blood!"

Holt held up a hand. "Okay, okay," he said in between rapid chewing. With his mouth full, he added, "I'll talk to them. But I won't promise anything, Chubby."

Chubby nodded, and bowed before he glided back

into the kitchen.

"I wonder who the poor slob was that got his head bashed in?" London posed the question more to himself than to Holt.

Holt shrugged, continued his atrocity on those wings, never once wiping the orange sauce that made it on his right cheek. "I'm sure it was just some scumbag."

"So you and Donaldson aren't fishin' buddies, huh?"

Holt scoffed. "I never asked him to be my best man at my wedding and he never asked me to be godfather to his children." He continued. "We were always at war with each other. He was attorney for the worst kind… I'm tellin' ya… back in the late seventies when the system was letting down the regular people, Paul Donaldson was winning almost every case! He once got this construction worker off on second degree murder from first degree. That construction worker killed his boss, hid him under the floorboards of a hospital they were building. All because the boss insulted his wife. Donaldson convinced the jury the boss bullied the construction worker." Holt shook his head wearily. He finished the wings, all three plates. He wiped his face with a napkin, missing a few spots. "He's probably trying to set me up for something."

"Is that why you asked Choaladi for help? To do something about Donaldson."

"No way I'm going to ask for help ridding myself of a creep like Donaldson," Holt chuckled. "Got a bigger problem than that. Somebody is moving in on my turf."

"Oh yeah?" London smiled. He thought the day would come when a bigger hand would push former Police Chief Tom Holt off the top of the mountain.

"Yeah," Holt said. "I only know his pseudonym," He leaned in and whispered, "Mr. Zero."

"Mr. Zero…"

'You've heard the name before?" Holt dipped a stubby finger in the bowl of blue cheese, stuck it in his mouth and sucked hard.

London looked away. He tried hard to shake off that image of Holt sucking his finger. "Yeah," London moved his eyes back to Holt, who was cleaning up the table with a new paper napkin. "I had to deal with somebody this Mr. Zero had a problem with. You ever heard of Georgie - boy Mavers?"

"Nope."

"He's a firebug."

"Hmmm… for hire?" Holt asked.

"Sometimes. Most of the time it's for fun. How about Xavier Cugat?"

The expression on Holt's face said it all.

"I know him. Fucking sleaze bag! I bet he's the one that burned down the Coffin Hop."

London chuckled. "He may have."

"I used to get a good piece of the proceeds from that establishment. A fucking shame."

"This… Mr. Zero… he rolls into towns like this and takes over… from what I've been told. You think he's a Cop?"

"I've heard rumors of all kinds. No one has ever seen him. All I know is he's on my stomping ground, getting' my share of the profits. I don't like it."

"I'll look into it," London stood, stubbed out his cigarette on the table beside Holt's plate.

"Hey!" Holt called out to London. "These tables cost money!"

"Take it out of my salary," London said as he exited the Thrill Kill.

12

London stood in the doorway of the puke-colored building across from the fire department. The purple floor was sticky. The red walls, designed to look like mattresses, was covered in dirt, blood, and God knows what else. There was a strong fragrance of piss that made London gasp.

The music was loud and full of bass. A lot of old school rap, none of which London recognized. The club only played two minute intervals of each song, which London found more annoying than the music itself. He had to admit, there was one rap song they were playing he liked, but he didn't know the name or who performed it. 'Don't push me, I'm close to the edge…I'm trying not lose my head…' and the guy kept saying, 'It was like a jungle'. London liked the groove. He even felt like tapping his foot to the song. Pop always did tell London to listen to more than just Sinatra.

Again, whoever the DJ was, they would cut the songs off in the middle and move on. One group he did recognize and that was The Who. Newly would play The Who over and over while they were driving to North Dakota last year. He liked most of the songs, even though he got sick of hearing 'My Wife' a hundred times. So London tossed the CD out the car window at two in the morning. Then he was sorry because he wanted to hear 'The song is over'.

London really liked that song.

Then he started to think about Newly. He really missed Newly. What made that worse was not knowing what happened to him. London didn't know if he abandoned him and the job, or he was killed by a friend of the Fat Freddie. When London returned to the hotel, Newly was gone. There

had been signs of struggle, broken glass, and the hotel door jimmied.

Newly was gone.

Either way, those thoughts made London feel uneasy…sad. He definitely didn't want to feel too much of anything at the moment. Messed with what he needed to accomplish. He had to shake it off. Get back to a certain train of thought.

In spite of all these downward attributes, the club was rockin'. Several business men in disheveled suit and ties were throwing money at an attractive yellow haired girl with the biggest ass London had ever seen. But when she turned her head during her little dance, he could see her face had either recently been in a car wreck or, as London guessed; way too many plastic surgeries. The overdeveloped lips gave that away.

In the corner, a fat naked, balding, old man wearing women's panties, was drunkenly screaming 'Peanut butter!' for no apparent reason except that it made him laugh until he spat up the remnants of draft beer. Whenever anyone walked by him, he would scream 'Peanut butter sandwich!' at them, and throw the last bits of his Ham sandwich at them. A hefty black man in leather coat came out of tiny office and dropped his large hands on the table. The hefty black man snarled, said something to the fat man in women's panties. Needless to say, the fat man stopped screaming 'Peanut butter' at the clientele.

A flat chested brunette approached London in her bare feet, wearing nothing but see through teddy. She smiled at London, showing blackened teeth and a pin ring in the middle of a very fat, pink tongue. London wrinkled his nose in disgust. She thought he liked what he saw, so the young girl took London by the hand and urged him away from the door.

"Come on, Sugar," the girl said in a squeaky Georgia accent. "Let Vitta take care of you."

Vitta walked London to a table, made him sit, and immediately placed herself on his lap. She giggled when she found out London had a hard on. "Is that for me?"

London wanted to say no. Truth be told, it was for any female who paid attention to him. Been a good two months since London had female companionship. So in a way, yes, it was for Vitta, but not because he generally had a thing for her.

London smiled, said: "I think it could be. But… I thought this was just a dancin' club."

"Well," Vitta leaned in, kissed London's cheek. "It's whatever your fantasy is, sugar."

"So… what? You take me in the back and fuck my brains out?"

Vitta stood suddenly, both hands on her hips. "Hey! What are you?! A fag or a cop?!" Her tiny eyes screwed up and her blond eyebrow's angrily turned downwards.

London had to hold it in. He put on a fake smile, spat out a fake laugh. "Heaven's no!" He exclaimed. "Police scare me, lady. I was just thinking out loud…and as for the other… well… you can be my wife and girlfriend…" London finished the sentence off with another guffaw. "Truth be told, little lady, I've been on the road for quite a while and not been… uh… touched by a woman…yeah. I sell insurance and… it gets very lonely."

Vitta's anger subsided. She eased herself back on London's lap, crossed her skinny, pale legs and showed him her rotten teeth again.

"Well, sugar," Vitta said. "I'm gonna rock your world." Vitta raised up slightly, her fingers fumbled for London's zipper. She rested her hand on his crotch, feeling the material, searching, then slowly ran her fingers up and

down London's erection

"Whoa!" London nervously shouted. "Ohhhh… uh… we're doing this… right here?"

"Oh," Vitta giggled. "You're the shy type, I see. Hmmmm… Sugar, we can go to the backroom…"

"Yeah, doll," London said in a strained voice, cleared his throat. "I would… uh… perform better, without an audience"

"Oooooooo," Vitta giggled again. Well let's get to that backroom!"

Vitta led London through a series of badly painted red doors. Whoever did the work was obviously incompetent or high. Red paint splattered the door frames, floor and walls beside the door itself. They went down this long corridor with framed black and white drawings of people in different sexual positions. Graffiti plastered the walls as well, messages hidden in the brightly colored fonts of different sizes and creation. The floor was littered with clothing, various bodily fluids, and people.

Men and women, men and men, women with women and several combinations. Loud moaning, screaming, indecipherable dialogue, all of which echoed throughout the corridor. London was far from turned on. Seeing so many unattractive people having sex made him queasy. As they passed by, Vitta kept looking back at London to catch his reaction, smiling at him with those rotten teeth did not help the situation at all.

Finally, Vitta roughly urged London into a small, dingy room, with only a dirty mattress on the floor and burnt out candles; held together by strange candelabrums, that looked like they had been stolen from the set of a 1970's horror film.

Vitta shut the door, locked it.

"Now we'll have some fun," she giggled.

London laughed, said in his fake nasal voice, "You don't lock the door, baby. I promise I won't run."

Vitta retrieved a butterfly knife from the cleavage of her Teddy. "You sure about that?" She showed those rotten teeth again.

London made a face. "For fuck's sake," he said. "Would you stop smiling at me? You're gonna make me puke!"

"Can't see how you can puke if I cut out you're insides," Vitta said.

Vitta rushed London, blade slicing at his forehead. London stepped to the side and Vitta's blade sliced air. London took the hand holding the blade and bent it backwards all the way to her hip. Vitta screamed out. London hit Vitta with his free hand, palm up, and busted her nose. Vitta squealed. Blood spurted all over London's arm and covered Vitta's cleavage.

Vitta went limp and London let her fall. She laid on the floor, her hand holding her injured nose. London bent down and grabbed the butterfly knife, tossed it on the mattress.

"Look bitch," London said through clenched teeth. "I didn't come here to get sliced up. I wanted to see a guy named Xavier Cugat!" Vitta didn't answer. She was busy whimpering, apologizing to God for leaving his flock. London grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her face out of her hands. She squealed again. "Is he fucking here!?"

"Yes!" She screamed.

"Where the fuck is he?" London leaned in and got in Vitta's face.

"Go… go… down the hall… and… and… you'll find him in… in the blue office!" Vitta bawled, sobbing in between words.

"You better not be lying to me!" London tossed

Vitta's head back and let go of her hair.

"I'm not! I swear! Oh please!!! Jesus come and save me!" Vitta rolled over on her stomach, sobbed harder, prayed to God for someone to rescue her.

"Why'd you pull a knife on me?" London asked.

"I - I thought you were a cop," Vitta said.

"Now you know better. I think you need a new line of work," London said, opened the door. He turned back to the weeping young woman. "Get out of here while you're young… go to school. And for Fuck's sake, get those teeth fixed!"

13

London stood in the corridor, looked in both directions. To the left was an exit door. To the right was the office painted blue. He heard this loud, obnoxious voice bellowing from the closed door, calling someone friend. Like a bull that had just seen the red flag waving, London marched down that corridor and kicked in Georgie-boy Mavers door. The door splintered, fell to the side before hitting the floor.

There he was, in all of his glory, resting his feet on his desk, chewing on a cigar. When his office door caved in, the cigar flew out of his mouth and his feet came off the desk. Georgie-boy Mavers dropped his cell phone and quickly dropped to the floor. No bullets shot up his office yet, so Mavers poked his head up and saw who kicked in his door.

"Holy shit," Mavers said nervously. "Barry London?"

"Get the fuck from behind that desk, you moron!" London screamed.

He heard running footsteps behind him. London whirled around as he unsheathed the Glock. The security man London had seen earlier stopped in his tracks, immediately raised his arms in the air. London placed the barrel of his gun on the man's nose.

"Hey," Mavers laughed. "No reason to flash that piece, London. Everything is peachy here, Reggie. Just an old friend dropping in."

"Sure, sure, Mr. Cugat," Reggie backed out of the threshold of the office and walked fast down the corridor.

London wheeled around and pointed the Glock in Mavers direction.

"Whoa, my friend," Mavers stood slowly. "Come on, Barry. You don't have to point that me. I don't have a gun. I never do."

London holstered his gun, inhaled, exhaled, and counted to ten in between. "Don't call me friend," London said. "And what the fuck is with that name, Xavier Cugat?"

"You don't know where that name comes from?"

"Am I supposed to?"

"Come on… you like that music too," Mavers said. He waited for a reply from London and was agitated when he didn't get it. "The man made the same music you listen to!" He said in a huff. "You listen to Dean Martin."

"Okay, so I fucking listen to Dean Martin. So the fuck what?!"

"Xavier Cugat led a big band that played music people danced to like the Tango and the Cha-cha."

How is that shit linked to Dean Martin? Okay, no more, I don't give a shit. The fuck are you doing back in the states?"

"Barry," Mavers sat behind his desk, waved a hand. "Canada was just too damn cold! I hate the cold!"

"I should have killed you when I had the chance," London said. "What are you doing, Georgie-boy? You should have took off for an island. Lay back, drink rum and coconut. Bed down a native girl. Instead you're here, trying to muscle in on someone else's turf? Not too smart."

"Barry, I don't do things like that. I'm a consultant. I was called in to help with business by friends of Tom Holt."

"Who called you in?"

"Uh-uh, Barry. You know I can not reveal sensitive information of that kind…"

London suddenly took hold of Mavers shirt and swung him around. Mavers cried out just as he slammed against the wall.

"Don't jerk me around!" London screamed in Mavers face.

"No, no, I would never!"

"Samantha called me in! Okay!"

"Holt's daughter called you in?" London removed his hand from Mavers shirt, took a step back. He thought for a second.

"I swear, Barry… that's the truth," Mavers said.

"Holt said Mr. Zero was moving into his territory."

"Mr. Zero… he usually works the Southwest and Midwest. Say, Barry, why'd you let me go? You knew I stole from the Cappaldi family. They would want you dead if they found me alive."

"Georgie-boy, they were not the ones who ordered your hit," London said. "Hell, I didn't even know you'd taken that money."

"I had ten thousand dollars strapped to my person when you made me run toward the Canadian border," Mavers laughed, shrugged. "Hey, what are you gonna do, huh? So… who ordered the hit?"

"Mr. Zero," London said.

"Ohhhhh… shit. What the hell did I do?"

"You burned down a car wash that was a front for his money laundering. June, two years ago," London said.

"Oh, no, no, Barry," Mavers wagged a finger. "Not me. I was in county lockup, San Jose California. Drunk in public. Took a swing at an officer. Served ninety days."

"Somebody set you up," London thought about it.

"I have an idea who," Mavers said.

"Who?"

"Your buddy, Newly."

"Come on!" London dismissed the notion. "He couldn't take a piss without somebody telling him how to."

"Yeah. Newly. You underestimate him, Barry."

"Newly didn't have the brains to come up with a plan to piss on his leg, let alone to set up a schmuck like you."

Mavers raised an eyebrow and sighed. "Barry. I love you, even though you get a little too violent. Sometimes you are blind to the ones you love. Newly," Mavers laughed. "He made you into the schmuck, my friend. I heard about Fat Freddy. I also heard about what gun killed Freddy. Walther PPK. I saw Newly with one in his belt when we sat down to eat at that café in South Dakota."

"He fits the description. The way he disappeared was weird, too," London sighed. "I never knew what happened to Newly. Fat Freddy was going to tell me something. Right before that masked man shot him."

"I think I have an idea of what that was about. A disc," Mavers said.

"A disc with photos of army people doing bad things to Afghani's?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"A little birdy told me. A birdy who might be more involved than he says he is."

Mavers had this stupid grin on his face. A half smile, his lips parted so anyone can see his beautiful white teeth, those slightly crossed, wide glaring eyes.

"What?" London always got agitated at Georgie-boy Mavers when he acted like a kid dying to tell a secret.

"Come with me," Mavers clasped his hands together and giggled. "I've got something to show you."

They walked down the end of the corridor. Mavers removed the lid to a box painted the same color as the wall. He punched in a six digit code on black buttons not numbered. There were three clicks and a buzzer sounded. The wall broke apart slowly to reveal an elevator.

Georgie-boy laughed, clucked his tongue. "Now comes the fun part," he said as he urged London to enter the

lift first.

Neither said a word as the elevator took them down all the way to the basement. The elevator stopped, the doors swung open and Mavers once again urged London to walk in front of him. London stepped out into near darkness, save for a lone florescent light that flickered. Mavers put a hand on his shoulder, stopped London from walking off the edge of the floor on either side.

"We haven't finished construction. Watch your step, Barry." Mavers walked on ahead, found a door and a doorbell. He was buzzed in, held the door open for London.

They stepped into a brightly lit room the size of a reception office. There were about fifteen people sitting at laptops and PC's, at least three phones at their stations. Large screen monitors showed people engaged in various activities. Some were shopping, some were at work, and some were either on their phone or on their respective computers delving into pornography online. One or two people were making deals of some kind, and at least one man and one woman were having sex in a bed in what looked to be a very cheap hotel room.

London watched all of this with intense curiosity and concern.

"What the fuck is this?" London said.

"Welcome to the 21st century way of Blackmail! Isn't it cool, Barry?" Mavers waved his hand as if he was Vanna White showing a contestant what they had just won. Mavers showed London each monitor. He pointed at a man breaking into a safe, then remembering to yank his stocking mask back over his face. Mavers chuckled. "Look at that fool. He's always pulling dumb stunts like that."

"How do you get the cameras on these people?" London asked.

"Oh, Barry, simple. Would you believe it? You send

them a card saying they've won a new cell phone. Most people don't even turn their phones off! We can put it in people's lunches… refrigerators at home or at work… But this guy… shit, all we did was give him a gold tooth. Can you believe that?" Mavers chuckled again.

"Fuck… remind me not to accept any gifts from you." London shook his head.

"The others, hey, they download an app for smart phones to record incoming calls. See, some phones can't do that. Once a person authorizes the app to collect the phone data, bam! We got 'em! Even turns on their camera. Slick, huh?"

He happened to look over another workers shoulder. The worker was busy explaining to a man on the phone what they had done wrong and how bad it could be for them if the wife found out about his gambling problem. On the smaller monitor was a whole brigade of Loughlin county cops busting through the club's door. In the background a short, skinny man made his way through the sea of police officers, headed out the same door they came in.

London recognized him.

"I'll be damned! Newly…" London whispered to himself. "Hey, get me outta here, Georgie-boy! Cops are on their way to your whore house upstairs!"

"What-no! It's not a whore house, Barry! It's a gentleman's club!" Mavers hit a red button and the whole floor was on lock down. Another door opened and all the workers rushed through it before Mavers and London could get there. "Hold on," Mavers grabbed London by the arm and turned to the elevator.

"Ohh, no, dumbass," London jerked away. "I'm not going back upstairs. The cops are there!"

"You don't have to." Mavers told London. "I got a secret tunnel under the lift. Come on!"

The tunnel led them through the sewer. London was not happy with Mavers. Standing outside the club, London blessed out Mavers until he saw Newly running around the other side of the building, heading toward a Cadillac that was already running. Two men were in the front seat, and when they saw London chasing Newly, both men opened their doors and flashed .45's. London caught up with Newly, grabbed hold of his shirt collar and tossed him to the pavement.

Newly fell sideways and rolled into some bushes. London reached out and pulled Newly to him, lifting him up a few inches. Newly's bodyguards sprinted toward them. Three City cop cars pulled in and the two men dumped their .45s. They slowly walked back to the Cadillac and spun out of the parking lot quickly.

14

London dragged Newly behind the bushes just as three more city Cops pulled in. He waited for the group to enter the club before making Newly walked to the far parking lot leading to the park. The park was empty except for a woman walking a small dog. London watched the lady until she and the dog disappeared down a wooded path. London made Newly walk to a bench.

"Sit!' He ordered. Newly did as he was told. London glared at him, then took a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, placed one in his mouth and lit it. London inhaled and exhaled quickly. He let the cigarette dangle from his bottom lip. "What the fuck, Newly?"

"Hey, man," Newly laughed nervously. "Really good to see you, Barry!"

"I should fucking kill you right now," London took another drag of his cigarette.

"Barry…" Newly started, he let the sentence hang for a moment, decided not to say anything else.

Daggers were meant for Newly. Newly sighed, shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Damn it, Barry. I didn't mean for this to get out of hand.

"That was a scam, huh?"

"I don't know what you mean, Barry."

"The hit on Mavers. Georgy-boy Mavers. All of that was a scam. Just to get to Fat Freddie," London said.

Newly shrugged. "Okay. Yeah," he said, closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Shit, I've got a killer of a headache."

"Ain't going to work, Newly. No sympathy."

"I'm not looking for any," Newly reopened his eyes.

"Who is Mr. Zero, Newly?"

"I don't know, Barry…"

London backhanded Newly hard. Newly cried out, fell off the bench.

"I swear, Barry…" He picked himself up, sat on the bench.

"You fucking know," London yelled. "And you know why he's horning in on Holt's territory."

"Okay, okay," Newly held up his hands to stop London from striking him again. "Just…take it easy….okay?" Newly took a moment to get himself together. He wiped away tears that had overtook his eyes and he breathed in and out slowly, to stop his chest from heaving. He collected his thoughts while London finished his cigarette. The night sky was beautiful and the stars covered the darkness like a net. "Remember my father in law?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"He's Mr. Zero," Newly said. "Randolph Henderson."

London glared at Newly. "The electronics tycoon? The guy who has the company that produces apps for every fucking phone in the universe?"

"That's him. You're right. The hit on Georgie-boy Mavers was a scam just to get to Fat Freddy," Newly said. "He set up Rollo Baker. Baker is tied into Holt. Baker owned an item that Henderson wants. Fat Freddy had that item and…"

"You killed him," London said. Newly nodded his head. "Yeah. I know that. Mavers ratted you out."

"Son of a bitch…" Newly whispered.

"I also know what the item is."

"A disc," Newly offered.

"Yep," London concurred. "Contains blackmail pics

for the military. Why does Henderson want it?"

Newly laughed. "Henderson wants insurance he will get a multi-million dollar deal with the U.S, government to use his computers for the next twenty years."

"In the meantime he takes over a territory," London stated. "If I get that disc for him, will he leave Holt's territory alone?"

Newly didn't right away. He removed a phone from his jeans, called a number. "Yeah. It's me. I've met up with an old friend of mine. He says he can get the disc." Newly waited for a reply. He listened, stared at London. "No. It's not Mavers. Barry London." Silent again. Newly turned from London, spoke into the phone. "He knows a lot of secrets, okay! One thing you need to understand is that Barry London is not a rat. He's never turned on anyone. Ever." Silence over the phone. The chirping started, more calmly this time.

Newly took the phone from his ears and handed it to London. "He wants to talk to you."

London snatched the phone from Newly. He was more than irritated. If Newly tried anything or Henderson spoke one wrong word, he would snap and Gemma City just might see the wrong side of Barry London.

"What?" London said into the phone. He listened. Henderson was even more agitated than London. But London decided to listen, said his peace, then hang up. Instead, Henderson made threats, backhanded compliments to London's reputation, more threats, how much he admires Pete Choaladi, he would give London a sizeable fee of five hundred thousand dollars, and finally, "You better not let me down," and he hung up.

London tossed the phone back to Newly.

"Sure is a lot of people looking for that disc," London stated. "So why'd you bring Loughlin county cops

with you, Newly?"

"I thought Mavers had the disc," Newly said.

"You two aren't friends anymore. He didn't hesitate to rat you out."

"He turned on us."

"You mean you, Newly," London said. "Come on. Let's get out of the park." They walked east on Tenth avenue, toward the pier. A barge was coming through slowly, the moonlight reflected off the water. They stopped and watched the barge roll on. London had doubts about what job he was supposed to do. He knew someone was going to get hurt.

"Boy, are they going to be pissed when they hear Mr. Zero is no longer interested in this territory." Newly laughed. "I hate this place. How in the hell did you grow up here, Barry?"

"I left, remember? Besides, I didn't grow up here," London mused. "I grew up on the streets."

"Yeah," Newly said, his thoughts were off, remembering something from the past. He came back to the present quickly. "Why'd you come back?"

London shrugged. "I guess I was curious."

London's personal phone rang. He didn't recognize the number. Without thinking, he answered. It was Samantha's voice.

"Barry," she was very upset. He could tell by her voice she'd been crying. "It's Dad. Somebody shot him…" her voice trailed off and another voice took over.

"Barry, this is Billy. We're at the Gemma Memorial Hospital. Can you come?"

"Yeah, Billy. What the hell happened?"

"Tom was shot. Twice actually. Cops think it was a sniper."

"Okay, I'm on my way," London closed the lid on

his burner phone.

"I heard. And before you ask, no, I don't know anything about it," Newly said, and walked to the park exit, turned right on Jameson Avenue.

15

London hit the hospital door at about one in the morning. He hadn't slept in eighteen hours and he was already feeling meaner than a two headed snake. He turned left at the elevator to get to the ICU. The security guard followed London until he came across Shelly. She greeted London, he cut his eyes at the guard and Shelly waved him away.

"They called you in, Barry?" Shelly said.

"I'm surprised you're here," London told her.

"I was the officer on duty. I found him on the sidewalk, Thompson and Brook, near the Vic cinema."

"The hell was he out there for? That place has been shut down for forty years."

"I think someone called him on his phone," Shelly said. She looked around, removed a plastic baggie with the cell phone inside. A piece of paper was taped to the bag with a number on it. "Recognize the number?" She put the baggie back in her pocket when she heard nurses coming down the hallway.

London sighed. "Yeah,"

"Well?"

"Oh no, Shelly. You know I don't kiss and tell."

"Barry, aren't you a friend of the family?"

"Not Holt's friend," London told her. "Just your brother."

"Barry, don't make me arrest you," Shelly said, removed handcuffs from her belt.

London showed her his wrists and smiled. "Just like the old days, Shelly. In your parents' bedroom."

"Stop harassing everyone, Officer!" Samantha yelled

from the doorway of Holt's room.

"I'm not harassing, Sam. I'm trying to solve the shooting of your Father!" Shelly shot back.

"You're not wanted here, you were never wanted anywhere near my family, and when I speak with assistant D.A. Lowe, you will not be on the case!"

"How would you like for me to pull out all of that beautiful dark hair, bitch!"

Both of them stepped up to each other, nose to nose, ready to tangle. London jumped between them, one hand on Samantha's chest, holding her back, the other hand on Shelly's shoulder, holding her back.

"Hold it, you two," London said. "This is not the place, nor the time. Get yourselves together, for fuck's sake."

"Whoa, girls…" Billy made an appearance, the twins at his side. "Calm down, both of you. Sam, let Shelly do her job. Shelly, stop antagonizing Sam. My God," he shook his head. "The both of you have been at each other's throats since you were teenagers."

"I have some ballistics to run," Shelly said. "I am not through talking to you, London." Shelly stormed off.

"You are off the case, you fucking cunt!" Samantha screamed at Shelly. Shelly turned toward the elevator and gave Sam the finger.

"Uggh!" Samantha stressed her point by wringing her hands. "I hate her!"

"Calm down, Sam," Billy said, placed a hand on her arm.

She pulled away. "You always take her side!"

"Sam…come on…"

She walked away from Billy, headed to the elevator.

"I better make sure she doesn't go after Shelly," London said. He didn't wait for Billy to agree with him. He trotted after Samantha, headed her off just as the elevator

doors opened. London stepped in first. Samantha stood there, her arms folded, looking like she was ready to explode. She stepped inside with London's urging.

The elevator door closed. They exchanged angry glances. Finally, London laughed.

"You're still a violent chick," London said.

"I'm not going after Shelly, damn it," Samantha said. "I'm having a cigarette."

"The fuck you are," London smiled at her.

Samantha let her lips tug up slightly. London kept leering at her, smiling, until they both broke up.

"Okay," Samantha giggled. 'I was going after her… then have a cigarette."

"Why are we taking the elevator if we're going outside?" London asked and they both laughed again.

Samantha stopped laughing, rushed to London. She threw her arms around London and kissed him deeply, passionately. London accepted the kiss until he realized who she was and who she was married to. He pulled away.

"What-why'd you stop…?" Samantha pleaded.

"Obvious isn't it?"

"Billy doesn't care! Especially about me."

The elevator door opened. A short haired nurse with pink lipstick entered. She didn't say anything, she reached across London and pressed the button for the lobby. They rode down in silence, and when the door opened, Samantha was first to exit the elevator. The nurse followed, giving Samantha the stink eye. London trotted after Samantha as she stormed through the double doors of the hospital.

"Sam?" London called out.

"Not now, Barry," she said, headed to the parking lot. "I have a lot on my mind."

That didn't detract London. He high stepped it and caught Samantha by the arm. "I need to talk to you. It has to

be now."

Samantha stopped, lowered her head and choked down some sobbing. She wiped her eyes, and looked up at London. "I didn't mean to kiss you."

"Hey, it's okay," London said. "I've already forgotten it."

"I wish you wouldn't," Samantha said softly.

"Billy is my friend, Sam. I could never do that to him."

She scoffed. "That's what he said about Gavin. He yearned for me for years."

"What guy doesn't yearn for you?"

Samantha smiled. "I guess I should hit the brakes. Huh? I mean…I don't think there's anything better out there. I can't help to keep searching."

London shook his head. "Billy loves and the boys. Don't fuck it up. Whatever you've done in the past, he doesn't need to know about it. Unless you think he does."

"Not now," Samantha said. "Maybe when we're old and decrepit."

"Yeah," London agreed. "Sam, I have to ask you something."

She let out an exasperated sigh. "Okay."

"Did you call in Georgie-boy Mavers? For help with your Dad's business'?"

"I did," Samantha said. "He's been trying to take over things ever since. The city cops, they don't answer to Dad anymore. They answer to Mavers…or Cugat…or whatever the hell he calls himself nowadays. It all started with the Coffin Hop."

"Did you ask your sons to burn the Coffin Hop down?"

"Barry! No! Why would I risk my sons' future?"

"Did your Dad ask them to do it?"

Samantha didn't answer his question. She glared at London, then said: "I've had. I'm walking away from you." She went to her car, got in, and started the engine. She didn't leave, she just kept staring at London.

London's attention switched to the man standing behind the tree. He was obscured by limbs, and when London approached. The tall man in rags, took off in a sprint. London started to run after him, but decided he'd never catch the guy. The man was way too fast and very tactical, weaving in and out of brush, bushes and trees, the stream down the hill, back through brush and bushes.

The man vanished from view.

"Shit," London said. He turned back toward Samantha's car. She too, was gone. "Shit balls."

16

Something told London he would find Newly at his hotel room.

He was right.

When he opened the door, there was Newly lying on London's bed, drinking London's beer and eating a Big Mac with one hand, holding the Walther PPK with the other hand. The barrel was aimed at the door for a long time. London saw how tired Newly's hand was from the way the gun swayed from left to right.

"What took you so long to get home? I was getting worried about you." Newly bit into the hamburger, sauce dripped down his chin to his black tee-shirt.

"Don't get that shit on my bed," London stepped inside, slammed the door. He threw his keys on the nightstand, stood motionless as he sized up the situation.

"I don't think you're going to need this bed anymore, Barry," Newly spoke with a mouthful, kept his eyes glued to whatever idiotic action film was on the Television. He finished chewing, then said, "That's why I procured over your bed."

"That word is a little too big or, sweet pea." London chuckled, put his hands on his hips.

That infuriated Newly. He threw the half eaten hamburger against the wall, sat up straight in bed. The beer bottle rolled on the floor, creating a small pond of liquid on the carpet. "Don't call me that!" The aim of the gun was much better, his hand a lot steadier.

London licked his lips. "All the sudden you're a tough guy, Newly? Why? Because you offed Fat Freddy?"

"I've killed more than one guy, asshole!" Newly

sputtered. He stood quickly. "In the last year, Barry," he giggled. The lamp was shining on his bald head, producing a freakish, mystifying halo around him. "I've lost count."

London gave Newly a standing ovation. The sound of London's clapping echoed. "Congratulations! Holy cow! Newly just became an adult on the street!"

Newly growled, sputtered some more. "Always so fucking condescending! What makes you so great? Huh?!"

Just before the silencer went off, London snatched Newly's wrist and yanked his gun hand toward the floor. The bullet struck the carpet and was embedded into the floorboard just beside the nightstand. London twisted his arm behind Newly. Pain surged from Newly's elbow all the way to his pinky. He dropped the gun and it slid under the bed. London elbowed Newly in the face, busting his nose.

Newly cried out.

His body suddenly went limp and London let him go. Newly fell to his knees, his hands covering his blood nose. London opened a dresser drawer, found a pillow case. He tossed it to Newly.

"Here," he grunted. "Hold that to your nose!"

London still cared about Newly. He considered him the little brother he never had. Although London would never tell Newly any of that. Feelings aside, London had a job to do. He needed to get to the bottom of Holt's shooting, and find out what the fuck Newly and Georgie-boy Mavers were up to.

"I know the two of you are in cahoots," London said, helped Newly to sit on the bed. "You and Mavers. I figured it out once I saw you in his place."

"I'm not in business with that fucknot!" Newly winced from the pain in the bridge of his nose.

"I don't believe you. You know Tom Holt was shot."

"No… what? We called it off… " Newly was baffled

by the developing situation. "Mr. Zero… Henderson… he called the war off. We broke ties with Loughlin County Police."

"Didn't break all the ties," London said. "I saw the phone number that called Holt. Came from Mavers phone."

"Look, I don't know what the hell you're talking about. I do know this: Georgie-boy has something going on with a long time enemy of Holt's."

"Paul Donaldson?"

"Yeah…look…we knew he was in with Donaldson. Donaldson, he's the one who put us with the Loughlin cops."

London thought about it. He shook his head. "No," he said. "Newly, you're lying. This whole thing stinks…"

London felt the shock through his whole body. His arms and legs were temporarily constrained. He moved one eye down to see Newly had a Hot-shot Sho-Stk attached to London's abdomen. The short, skinny stick sent a medium voltage currency through London's body, just enough to stun and knock him out. London's body fell hard with a loud thud.

Newly didn't take the time to goad, or have a funny quip. He got the hell out of the hotel room.

London woke up a few hours later. First thing he noticed was the smell of piss. He'd pissed himself when Newly used the Sho-stik on him. The second thing was a Gemma City cop was standing over him. He wasn't inside his hotel room anymore. London rolled over on the sidewalk and jumped up to a squatting position after he's almost put his face in dogs hit.

"Hey buddy," the Officer said. "I'm not sure what game you and your friend was playing, but you don't do that kind of thing in public."

"What are you talking about?" London croaked. "All

I know is I passed out in my hotel room… and now I'm here…"

"On Twenty-Third Avenue. In case you haven't noticed." The Officer fixed his slacking belt on his uneven hips. He moved his hand across his huge belly and back on his gun. The man obviously hadn't noticed the seventies were over, his porn-stache needed trimming along with his nose and ear hairs.

"I haven't," London told the Officer. London stood slowly, wobbled bit, and the Officer helped steady him. "What friend are you talking about? I was drinking by myself."

Suddenly, the Officer had sympathy for London. Maybe London struck a chord with the cop, touched on a personal problem he'd had or still has. "Hell, buddy. Maybe you should quit if you don't know you have a friend… or maybe the guy came in your room? What hotel?"

London told him, leaned against the police cruiser. "Yeah. I forgot to lock it, I'm sure of it. I always do. What'd he look like?"

"Tall fellow. Wearing rags. Weird," the Officer chuckled. "He was wearing a scarf on his head that covered his face, too. Like one of them Arabs. Anyways, he went running after my partner and I pulled up. He was dragging you down the sidewalk. Going toward Lt. Shelly Hope's place. My partner ran after him. He's a lot younger than me. I'm sure he's caught him by now."

A white and green Loughlin county police cruiser came speeding around the corner. The city cop rambled on about how long he'd been on the force. London noticed the county cop car was speeding and just as it was reaching a destination, it slowed a bit. But the city cop kept talking not really paying attention. London knew the tactic. London saw the riders side window roll down and a Smith and Wesson

M&P with a silencer attached, edged out.

London hit the sidewalk and rolled away from the city cop just as three bullets struck him in the back.

The city cop yelped, closed his eyes. He raised his arms slightly, hunched over, before he fell forward. The city cop landed on the sidewalk and flopped. The county police cruiser sped off, headed toward Jefferson ramp to Loughlin county courthouse. London got to his knees, watched to make sure they didn't come back.

He heard the ambulance and several city police cars rolled ahead of them. London made sure he blended in with the crowd onlookers forming. After a few minutes, he decided to walk out of the crowd and to the area the city cop pointed where he chased the unknown man. A few blocks down, almost at the park, London saw a city cop sprawled out by an empty bicycle rack. Three bullets had entered and exited the back of his head.

London turned back around, walked quickly away from the area and the dead cop. He found himself headed toward Billy Hope's garage.

17

London walked into Billy's garage and saw Billy sitting on the floor, looking confused. He was holding a .45 in his right hand and he kept readjusting his cap with his left. Took him a few seconds to realize London was standing over him. The body of a man leaned inside London's car, the door wide open. Another body was sitting in the driver's side, hunched over the steering wheel.

"I shot him," Billy said. "Blew the top of his head off."

London could almost guess who it was, seeing the man from behind. He was small, thin, and bald, his hair shaved off completely. London wanted to be sure. He crouched down beside Billy and tugged the man's shirt lapel. The face flopped backwards to London.

It was Newly.

"You shot the hell out of him," London said. "What was he doing in your garage?"

"I came in here… just to get a tool I forgot to give back to Schroder Davis. He-he has a shop out on Longley. I… I saw this guy placing someone in your Cougar. Well, he'd just…finished…he was tidying up. Wiping fingerprints I think." Billy's eyes moved back to the body, then back to London. 'He didn't even know what hit him. Didn't know…" Billy choked back sobs, closed his eyes to get himself together. He reopened his eyes, swallowed hard. "He didn't know I was behind him."

"Anybody else come inside the garage?"

Billy shook his head. "No."

"Cops haven't responded?"

"No," Billy croaked. "Their busy, I guess. All the cop shootings…haven't you heard?"

"Yeah," London walked to the driver's side of the car. "I heard." He looked inside, saw the other body was Georgie-boy Mavers.

"You know these guys, Barry?"

London shrugged. "I've seen them around. You got two shovels?"

"Yeah. I got two shovels," Billy said, stood slowly. "What are we going to do?"

"Taking a ride to Pennsylvania," London said. "We need a car… something with good trunk size. How about your'79 Crown Victoria?"

"No, No way… get blood in it…" Billy whined. "Dead people… no way… Come on, Barry."

"You want me to dump the bodies on the sidewalk?"

"Well… no," Billy said. He threw his hands up. "Okay. What the hell. It's only a classic."

18

London saw the tail the minute they were out of Loughlin County. Of course it was a county cop. And of course he sucked at tailing. At twelve thirty in the morning, who else would be following London so closely? London recognized the County's unmarked vehicle, a black Dodge Charger from 2016. Plus, whoever was driving was away too erratic, speeding up, slowing down, weaving from one side of the road to other, trying to make London think they were a drunk driver.

Even Billy knew the car belonged to Loughlin County police department. He started fiddling with his cap and swearing under his breath. "Oh shit, oh shit."

"Take it easy," London said, watching the unmarked car from his rear view mirror. "Everything will be okay." London mashed the gas pedal. The Crown Vic took off as if it was heading into outer space.

The Charger raced behind the Crown Vic. London slammed on the breaks and did a complete U turn. The Crown Vic fishtailed. The Charger stopped inches away from the rider's side of the Crown Vic. London mashed the gas pedal again and the car sped the other direction heading back to Loughlin County.

"Oh shit, Oh shit!" Billy screamed.

"Shut up," London told him. "You're making me nervous!"

London remembered seeing a fire trail when he drove through Loughlin County a few days ago. He took a sharp left and grazed the car with the side of a White Oak tree. Billy smacked the dashboard and cursed. London

laughed, looked in the rear view mirror and saw the Charger speeding up behind him.

The fire trail led to an unfinished golf course. London decided to take the Loughlin County Police department on a short fun journey. The two cars raced around the first hole for ten minutes as if they were on a speedway track. London grew tired of the chase. He swung the Crown Vic toward the half-finished Cabana building, took the left side off.

The wall flew in the air and into the Charger's windshield, cracking the glass, bounced off the hood and landed on the ground. The Charger rolled over the top of the wall and spun out into the cabana, completely destroying the building. London took a quick three sixty, rolled up slowly beside the Charger. Two Officers climbed out of the Charger, one a uniform cop, the other a plain clothes.

London knew the plain clothes Detective.

Detective Carrol Monroe stumbled around the back end of the Charger. He fell to his knees, struggled to rise, fell again. Blood trickled down, blinding Monroe. His forehead was bleeding from falling forward into the dashboard. The unknown Officer took off running through the golf course. Billy started to sprint for him and London stopped him.

"Don't chase him," London put a hand on Billy's chest. "We've got someone who knows some answers."

"Fuck you, London," Monroe started to crawl away from them. "I'm not telling you shit."

London took three steps and kicked Monroe in the ribs. Monroe shrieked, his voice echoed at the empty golf course.

"You might want to sit in the car, Billy," London growled. "This is going to get ugly."

Billy scoffed. "I can handle ugly, Barry. I might get in a few shots myself."

"If I wasn't hurt, you mother fuckers would be running from me!" Monroe screamed. He tried to stand, wobbled and fell again.

It was obvious to London that Monroe had a concussion. London also didn't care. Monroe fumbled for the Smith and Wesson in his shoulder holster. London smacked the gun out of Monroe's hand. The gun tumbled to ground and London kicked it out of reach.

To stop himself from falling over, Monroe steadied himself with both hands, something he shouldn't have done. London stepped on Monroe's right hand. Monroe squealed. He ran the heel of his shoe even deeper on the top of Monroe's hand, then twisted hard. Monroe squealed again, his light brown skin became even paler than before.

London hit Monroe three times. Once in the nose, busted the bridge. Blood squished out. Monroe shrieked, immediately threw his hands over his nose. London punched him twice in his right eye, then threw him to the ground. London was ready to kick him in the face when Billy stopped him.

"Hold on, man," Billy said. "Give him some breathing room."

Monroe began to weep hard.

London gave Monroe a few minutes to recuperate. In those few minutes, he'd lit a cigarette and smoked it, taking long drags and exhaling slowly. He stared at Monroe as if he was going to rip his head off. That scared Monroe so much, he pissed his pants. Warm liquid soiled the front of Monroe's three hundred dollar slacks and ran down his pencil-thin legs.

"I'll tell you anything you want…" he said, hiccupping every other word. "Just don't hurt me anymore."

London took his foot off of Monroe's hand. "Why are you tailing me?"

"We wanted to see where you were going. And if you left New Jersey, we knew we'd won."

"Won what?" Billy asked.

"The war," Monroe sat against front end of the Charger. Billy found a dirty rag he'd had in his back pocket and tossed it at Monroe so he could stop the bleeding on his nose or his forehead. He chose to stop the bleeding on his nose and use the sleeve of his jacket to wipe it from the wound on his forehead.

"What war is he talking about?" Billy asked London.

London bit his tongue. "Gemma City Police has a small tiff with Loughlin County Police."

"Over what? Doughnuts?" Billy giggled.

"Turf," London said, finished his cigarette. He flicked the burning butt from his fingers. When it landed on the grass, ashes flickered and London smothered the life out of the butt with his shoe. "Besides turf, what are you ladies fighting over."

Monroe was silent. London stepped forward and grabbed Monroe by his shirt. He offered a closed fist and Monroe squealed. "No! Please! Please don't hit me anymore!"

"Then talk!" London screamed.

"A disc!" Monroe said quickly. "A disc!"

"A disc? What CD of music… ?" Billy was confused.

"No. Pictures," Monroe said.

"That's kind of dumb. Nobody bothered to place them on a thumbnail drive. Behind the times…"

"Shut up, Billy!" London ordered.

Monroe continued. "The disc was something Holt had on him and was going to sell to a government man when a fire broke out at the Coffin Hop. We were there to take it from him before the sale… and then the fire happened."

"Who was with you?"

"Come on, London?"

"Who?! Or I swear to God, Monroe, I'll tear your arm off and shove it up your ass until it comes out of your mouth and wave's bye, bye!"

"Okay! Okay!" Monroe shied away from London. He caught his breath and went back to his testimonial. "Converse and Hornsby."

"Surprise, surprise," London imitated Jim Nabors. He was actually proud how close he got to the voice. No one laughed. Billy looked at London as though he'd just stepped in dog shit.

"Might as well tell you who it's for," Monroe said. He wiped a trickled of blood heading toward his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. A large blood smear appeared on the grey material.

"Mr. Zero," London answered for him.

"What? Who? No, uh-uh. Never heard of a Mr. Zero. Donaldson. That is who hired us to take it from Holt. Well… him and his Cousin."

"Who is his Cousin?"

"Willy Snyder," Monroe said.

"Fuck," London kicked dirt the opposite direction. He had Willy right there and he was probably at the bar to meet up with Converse and Hornsby. They expected Willy to turn when they saw London talking to him. "Where can I find Willy?"

"City Morgue," Monroe quipped. "Some kids found him by the quarry a few miles from the docks. Two bullets in the head. Eyewitness saw him with a short, bald man… you know, like he'd shaved all his hair off for nothing? Anyway, he fit the description of a known associate of Xavier Cugat, who runs a titty bar that used to be under Holt's protection. Until recently the club changed management."

If he only knew what Georgy-boy really been up to,

the cops would want in on it, too, London thought.

"You might want to call someone to get you," London walked to the Crown Vic and opened the door. Billy followed him, went to the passenger's side, opened the door and jumped in.

"Wait!" Monroe called out. "Aren't you going to drop me off at the hospital?"

London turned to him. "Billy's car. He has a strict 'no cops' in his car rule."

"London, come on, man! Don't leave me here…"

London got in and slammed the door. He fired up the Crown Vic and sped off, tires kicking dirt in Monroe's direction.

"Come on, man!" Monroe screamed out. "London! London! Come back, man!"

19

London and Billy didn't get back to the garage until after six pm that day. Both were tired and irritable and hadn't spoken to each other in hours. When they entered the garage, Samantha was waiting for them. She'd been crying. The boys were sitting in metal chairs looking at their phones. When she started screaming at London and Billy, they stood, pushed out their chests as if they were going to protect Samantha. She didn't need any protection, as fierce as she was.

"Where the fuck have you been!?" She screamed at Billy.

"I had business with Barry…"

"You needed to be with me! Them!" Samantha pointed at her sons.

"Sam… You don't understand…" Billy tried.

"I understand you don't care about any of us! You are selfish!"

"Whoa… hold on, Sam…" London intervened, but it was blindsided and short.

"Stay out of this, London!" Samantha turned her furry loose on London. "This is family business!"

"Sam, Barry is family…"

"We're through, you moron! I'm trying to tell you I want you out of the house as of today!"

"No…" Tears came to Billy easily. London always thought Billy was way too emotional. One of the reasons he tried not to use him for any jobs. "We — we can work this out…"

"I don't want to…" Samantha broke down. She marched out the garage door, slamming it behind her.

Billy and London exchanged bewildered glances.

"Grandpa died," Ricky said.

"He died at two this morning, at the hospital," Donnie said, looked down at his shoes.

Ricky was already sobbing, but managed to carry on the conversation. "Mom is really upset because of it… and you weren't there for her Billy."

"Yeah," Donnie cleared his throat, quickly wiped tears away. "She doesn't mean what she says, Billy. She loves you. Right now, she hates you."

London smiled at that last statement.

"Go after her, Billy," London said. "Me and the boys can finish here. Anyway, you know Sam wants people to chase her down so she can make up. She's always been that way."

"Okay, Barry. Thanks," Billy sprinted through the garage door.

London put his hands on his waist and said, "Okay you pussies, stop your sobbing and get the fuck to work."

Both boys cracked up. Ricky punched Donnie in the arm. "Yeah, you pussy! Stop your whaling, you're getting the floor wet."

"Fuck you," Donnie guffawed in between sobs. "You're the pussy, looking at gay porn on your phone!"

"Okay, shut up, both of you," London ordered. "I need you dummies to scrub the garage clean, while I wipe down my car."

"Jesus, Barry," Ricky said. "What'd you and Billy do? Kill somebody?"

London gave him a hard glare. Immediately Ricky was sorry he said anything.

London scoffed. "Yeah, buddy. A fuckin' deer came in the shop and your Stepdad shot it."

"Holy fuck!" Donnie exclaimed.

"Cool!" Ricky laughed. "I didn't know Billy was such a good shot!"

"We know he can't grill," Donnie laughed.

"Enough talkin', dummies," London said. "Get the mop buckets already."

As soon as London said that, a sphere of light from the florescent bulbs bounced off of a plastic CD holder. London smiled, shook his head. He knew what it was. He knew either Mavers or Willy had the CD and dumbass Newly killed one of them for it. Maybe that was a copy. Actually, London didn't give a shit how the CD was found or who had it.

He knew he was happy he got the fucking thing.

"Hey! One of you dummies got a laptop?"

"I do," Donnie said. "In my backpack."

"Get it," London told him. "Ricky, I need you to get some bleach from the mop room. Pour it on the blood."

"Hey…I want to see what's on the disc," Ricky said.

"Do what I told you to do first," London said. "Then come and look, okay?"

Donnie brought his backpack in the garage. "Mom and Billy were driving away before I caught them." London handed him the disc after he unpacked the laptop. He powered it up, pushed a button for the tray to open. He opened the blood splattered jewel case with care. He looked at the disc and laughed. "You ever heard of a memory stick, Barry?"

"Just put the fucking disc in, twerp," London said.

Ricky walked up behind them just as the files opened. A video immediately began to play. Soldiers entered a room and began beating seven men chained to a wall. Someone spoke broken Afghani and one man answered slowly in Afghani. He spit blood from his torn mouth and spoke again. A soldier walked up and hit the man with the butt of his rifle.

"Okay, okay," London ejected the disc from the laptop. "That's enough, you twerps."

"Aww, no, Barry!" Donnie whined.

"For fuck's sake! I just got to look!" Ricky complained.

"No more lip from either of you!" London's voice carried and bounced off the concrete walls, adding a slight reverb to his bellowing. "Get this place cleaned up, and maybe I'll let you watch some more of that video."

20

London tried to get some sleep that night. His phone kept ringing. First time was Shelly. Her voice was scratchy and slurred a little.

"What are you up to?" Shelly asked.

London yawned. "Trying to get some damn sleep. This bed in the hotel room is too fucking hard."

Shelly laughed. "Yeah, I know. Of course…" she sighed. "We do much sleeping that night."

"What do you, Shelly?"

"You," she said softly. "I'm lonely."

"So call somebody else," London told her.

"Stop being such a grouch, Barry. You can sleep at my place," she giggled. "My bed is soft."

"I'm hanging up, okay?"

"Barry… I'm lonely."

London thought about it. Shelly had been getting on his nerves lately. Pestering him who that phone number belonged to. It was obvious it was a VOIP and Shelly and/or, the cops were too stupid to figure it out. Any scammer can use a laptop to steal phone numbers and pose as another number. That number she's asking for more than likely doesn't exist anymore. That number was from a burner, and has been destroyed. But London loves to toy with Shelly. Actually, she's become hotter than Samantha. Especially when she's angry.

"You're drunk," London said.

"So," Shelly cooed. "That just means I'm easy." She exhaled deeply. "You can do what-everrrrr you want to me, Barry." Shelly giggled.

"Sleep it, Shelly," London growled. "You're making

a fool of yourself." A long grin appeared on London's face as he said that.

Shelly scoffed. "Fuck you, London!" The call ended.

London roared with laughter.

He looked at his phone on the end table, turned off the lamp. He laid back in bed and covered up, turning on his left side. He'd just closed his eyes when his phone rang.

"Fuck!" London screamed.

He turned the lamp on, and reached for his phone. He sat up against the headboard and swiped to reveal who was calling him. It was Billy.

"The fuck does he want?" London sighed. He ran his finger across the screen of his phone to answer the call. "What?"

"Barry?"

"Yeah, damn it. What the fuck do you want, Billy?"

"Look," Billy paused. "I'm worried about the cops."

"Why should you be worried, Billy?"

"Because…" he cleared his throat and lowered his voice, almost to a whisper, "Of what I did."

"Okay," London yawned. "What did you do?"

"Fuckin' hell, Barry!" Billy's voice was raised with more decibels London cared for. London winced and took his ear from the phone. When Billy's voice was at a normal range, he placed his ears comfortably back on the phone. "Stop fuckin' with me, please. I'm freakin' out here."

"Billy?"

"Yes?"

"Is Sam there?"

"Yeah."

"Are the boys there?"

"Well… yeah."

"Okay," London said. "Here's what I want you to do."

"Okay," Billy croaked nervously.

"Go see if they are asleep in their rooms. Tell them you love them."

"Okay, Barry — what the hell…"

"Shut up and listen!" London took a breath, yawned again.

'Barry…okay."

"Go back to your bed. Make love to Sam," London said. "Tell her you love her. Go to sleep. Wake up in the morning. Go to the garage and fix my mother fuckin' car. Got that?"

The phone was silent. London could hear Billy breathing, or maybe he quietly weeping. Maybe he was masturbating. Who the hell knew? London didn't care. But he needed confirmation Billy understood him.

"Billy?"

"Yes."

"Do as I say," London told him. "Go about your life like normal. You'll be fine. Trust me. No one cares what you did."

"Oh yeah," Billy said. "Then why is someone watching me through the window right now?"

21

When London arrived at Billy's house, six men with shotguns had Billy held up in the garage behind the house. London walked in and a man in a black sports jacket smashed him in the nose with the butt of the shotgun. London was stunned at first, he reeled backwards, caught his balance, but the pain was so great it interfered with him staying conscious. Weakness grabbed hold of his legs and wrestled him to the ground. The man in the black sports jacket stood over London and spat a long, slimy stream of snot in his face.

"You get what you deserve, mother fucker," Monroe said.

"Okay, okay. Enough bullshit," A commanding voice bellowed from the garage door. "I let you do what you thought you needed to do, now shut the fuck up and go stand in a corner." He stepped out of the darkness, tall, dark haired, in his late fifties, wearing a belt that cost as much as Billy's house payment. He was wearing a black three piece suit with a white tie, and one thing London kept thinking was the man's hair was immaculate. He stood in his alligator boots at six foot five, a very intimidating presence and a nasty scowl across his bearded face to match.

In the real business world he went by the name of Randolph Henderson from Houston. To the criminal underworld he was Mr. Zero.

Monroe did as he was told. He went to a corner, looking like a whipped dog.

"Help him up," Henderson ordered one of his cronies. "Where's the other asshole?" Another crony pushed Billy forward with his shotgun. Billy stumbled toward

Henderson. Henderson looked Billy up and down, then London.

"These two don't look like much," Henderson said.

"Sir, they beat me…" Monroe began. Henderson wouldn't let him finish.

"Did I ask you to speak!?" Henderson's voice echoed. There was silence for a few minutes. Henderson sighed. "I can't do anything to you. Might start a war. Choaladi is one of the few business rivals I actually like."

"A lot of people say," London said, winced from the extreme pain surging through his nose. He found a dirty rag that had been lying on the floor and pushed it against his nostrils to stop the bleeding. "More than what I can say for your reputation."

Henderson laughed. "You mean Mr. Zero's."

London guessed Henderson started out young in the business like him. He looked like he had a rough life. Possibly through drugs and drink, a scar above his left eyebrow played a major plot point in his life. He may have even been a cowboy at one point. He sure had the swagger of one. Only thing missing was the Stetson.

"I don't like the fact that you have something of mine," Henderson's demeanor changed in a flash.

"Have you thought about…maybe…Newly has what you are after?"

Henderson laughed again. "You are somethin'," he shook his head. "You two killed Newly."

Billy started to hyperventilate. London gave him the stink eye. Billy tried to control it, but the more he tried, the more tears ran down his cheeks and his chest heaved faster.

"I don't give a shit about that!" Henderson screamed. "I want my fuckin' disc!"

"I told you I would get it!" London screamed back, winced.

"What are you talking about?" He turned to one of his cronies and said: "What is he talking about?" One of them shrugged and Henderson was disappointed no one offered an answer. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"We spoke on the phone a few days ago," London told him. Henderson stared at him blankly. "Newly called you?"

"I haven't spoken to Newly in over a year. I didn't even know if he was alive until… well… until you two took care of him.

Billy immediately vomited.

Henderson rolled his eyes. "Come on. You did the deed," he said to Billy. "Get over it." He sighed. "Take him in the house with the others."

A crony took Billy by the arm and walked him up a small flight of stairs. After a few minutes, he returned to his position.

"He had me call somebody." London said.

"Yeah," Henderson chuckled. "I'm sure it was that bloated Monkey-fuck Mavers… or Cugat… or whatever the fuck he calls himself. They had scams running everywhere, so I'm told. One of which that bastard Holt and Mavers had some surveillance footage of me meeting someone the Military has been hunting since Nine-eleven. I had no business with that…person. It was all personal. So, a few weeks ago I met up with Holt at the Coffin Hop club. We were talking and all the sudden a fire broke out. Mayhem, brother. I saw the disc in Holt's hand, I was ready to pay him…and that shit happened. As I was leaving in a hurry, I saw the disc on the floor. I went back to get it… " He looked at a crony with two black eyes and bandages on his arms. "And one of my employees dragged me out the backdoor of the Coffin Hop."

"I'll look for it," London said. "You let Billy and his

family go."

"Damn straight you will. I'll let them go when you hand me that disc."

"I'd shake your hand, but I might be tempted to strangle you first."

Henderson laughed. "I bet you would, boy." He laughed again. "I bet you would."

22

London walked down fourth and Addison and saw the burned out building that used to be the Coffin Hop. Yellow tape was supposed to prevent anyone from passing through the entrances, but London didn't give it a second thought. He lifted up the yellow tape and ducked under it. He took out a penlight from his jacket pocket, flashed it around before he walked around. It still smelled of gasoline.

He remembered reading about the fire. Thankfully no one was hurt. The fire happened around two in the morning. The blaze could be seen from all points in Gemma, even at the docks. The person or persons involved dowsed everything in gas and lit a match, according to the fire chief and fire inspector.

From the looks of things, fire department must have responded quickly. A few tables and half of the stage was still intact. The bar, however, was a charred piece black hump. Luckily, there was no explosion. All the bottles of liquor around. It's almost like the fire department was there waiting to put a fire out. But to London, that made no sense at all. The fire department is less than a block away. From where London was standing, he could see the fire burned away the right half of the building, including the V.I.P. Lounge on the second floor and the owner's office.

London decided to go downstairs to the basement.

That was a mistake.

He got to the bottom step and a shadowy figure rushed London, slamming him against a brick wall. The man started for the steps and London grabbed onto his belt, pulling the man to his knees. The man let out a wild-child scream. The sound cut through the dark silence like a laser

through paper. The man elbowed London in the chest. London dropped the pin light.

Complete darkness overtook the basement. He was still hanging on to the man's belt, pulled the man down on his back. The man cried out like a wounded animal. By now, London was operating on luck and striking where the sounds were coming from. London threw four hard blows to the man's collarbone. There was a loud crack after the last blow and the man howled again.

But he didn't give up.

The man was also operating off of sounds. London's breathing. He hit London with all he had left in him. The left cross caught London on the cheek, sending him backwards. The man jumped to his feet and dashed upstairs. London laid on the floor, listened to the man's running footsteps out the charred building.

As London slowly got to his feet, his hands fumbled with something hard. It felt like a coin of some kind. London found his pin light. He clicked the button on and a small beam of light found its way to his right hand. It was no coin London had ever seen. It looked bronze and was 1 ¼ inches in diameter. On the front side it says Afghanistan campaign and on the back it shows an Eagle and the words '*For service in Afghanistan*'.

"I'll be damned," London said.

That wasn't the only item lying on the floor. A jewel case for a CD. London shined his pin light on the case. Yep. A CD was inside. He laughed. Whoever this guy was, he had the disc Henderson wanted. No wonder no one could find the disc.

London went upstairs to the club. He sat at a burned out table. He tapped the CD case with the insignia. He had an idea who he had a fight with down in the basement. Suddenly, a plan started to formulate. He took a burner out

from the front pocket of his jeans. He dialed Donaldson's office.

A sweet young woman from the Bronx answered. London told her to patch him through to Donaldson. She said he was with a client. London told the secretary he'd tell Donaldson's wife about the two of them. She patched him through quickly.

"What?" Donaldson said gruffly.

"Oh," London chuckled. "Did I interrupt something… again?"

"What do you want, London?"

"Still answering questions with questions. Okay, okay, Donaldson. I have something you've been looking for."

Donaldson's demeanor changed slightly. Now he was back kissing ass, even if the ass didn't taste like vanilla. "Really. That's swell, Barry."

"Swell? Do people use that phrase anymore? Shit, who cares huh?"

"Yeah, yeah," Donaldson laughed. "Who cares? So….do you have what I think you have?"

"I do."

"Oh my," Donaldson squealed like a teenage girl swooning over the latest teen idol. "Should we meet somewhere?"

"Oh yes. How about that used tire place on Jefferson?" London said.

"Mikey's? I don't know, man. That's risky. I don't know him that well."

"I know him. He's got people that do business with my people. If I tell him to scram, he'll jet."

Fine then. That's awesome. Say… whatever the sale of this item, I'll definitely give you… say… ten percent. A finder's fee."

"A finder's fee," London mulled it over. "You know, Donaldson, I've been through a lot," London heard Donaldson get exasperated. "You okay there, buddy?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Tell me what you want!" The asshole came out again. London smiled. He loved it when he got to people. Needling people is much fun.

"Thirty percent," London said.

"That's all? Oh. Well, I thought you'd want half."

"No. I'm not greedy. I still have to pay tribute to my boss."

"Then it's a date," Donaldson chuckled.

"Hey, now. Won't your secretary get jealous?"

Donaldson mumbled a few curse words and hung up.

23

London made it to his hotel room. He decided to call Pop. He told him what had happened so far, even finding the pin and the two discs.

"Son," Pop chastised London. "You are playing a dangerous game."

"Has to be done, Pop. I need to wrap it up."

"You can finish by having Choaladi send some soldiers in and take care of everything. He'll send a cleaner afterwards."

"I appreciate the concern. I do," London said. "I think this situation would be best handled alone."

There was a pounding at the hotel room door. The announcement of police officers.

London sighed, retrieved his Glock from the dresser drawer. "I gotta go, Pop. Got visitors."

"Oh boy. Be safe, son," Pop said and rang off.

London tossed the cell phone on the bed, made sure the Glock was loaded.

"Police! Open up!"

London laughed. "Coming," he called out. He didn't even bother to dress. Shirtless and still in his underwear, London slowly paced himself towards the door.

As soon as the hotel door burst open and the hinges fell to the floor, a hail of bullets covered the threshold like a net. The bullets didn't come from London. They came from down the hallway. The cops that busted down the door lay dead just inside London's hotel room, and London had ducked behind the bed, felt the remaining bullets whiz by his head. He heard several voices screaming at each other to freeze and announce that they were the only law in Gemma.

London crawled to the bathroom, feeling more bullets pass by. He kicked the door shut, waited a minute, and then looked out the bathroom window. Yep, just what Pop said. War between city and county cops. The Loughlin county cops had caught Gemma city cops right where they wanted them, in an ambush. It was insane. To London cops were not supposed to behave this way. At least in the minds of normal people. But why the hell would both county and city show up at his hotel room?

Several more gunshots were fired.

Several more dead police officers lay in the hallway.

Shit, London thought. I'll be damned if I'm going to stick around and find out.

He waited for the battle to calm down, looked out the bathroom window and saw the remaining alive county police had left their posts. He heard heavy boots running up the metal scaffold outside the bathroom window. They were coming for him. London opened the bathroom window and crawled out on the metal scaffold. He met up with two cops in riot gear. Instead of shooting, London busted the cop's plastic visor with the butt of his Glock, knocking him into the other cop. They both fell off the scaffold and on the hard pavement below. London waited to see if they moved, which they did but could not rise to their feet because of their injuries.

London saw he levelled with the roof of a bank to the left of the hotel. He took a chance and jumped, landing on his bare feet. He heard something snap in his right ankle. London fell and rolled to the edge of the roof. Immense pain surged from his ankle to his knee. He had no time to worry about pain. London rose, hobbled to the next metal scaffold, and climbed down to an empty alley behind the bank.

A black Ford pickup raced down the alley toward him. London raised his Glock, aimed it at the truck. He was

in no mood for games. This time he would shoot and definitely kill. He saw a swirl of blond hair hanging out the driver's window. London lowered his gun and waited to see who it was in the truck.

"Get in!" Shelly screamed.

24

Shelly lived in a townhouse in Oakwood Farms, a suburb just outside of Gemma. Three bedrooms, two bath and a kitchen big enough for a French restaurant chef to work in, and it mystified London why a single woman would live in a place by herself. He had to ask.

"I lived with a man I intended to marry," Shelly said. She had London on her couch, bandaging his ankle. "He had two girls and a chocolate Labrador. He was a Medical examiner for the county. And we lived together for three years. One day he up and left. Took his daughters, his dog and his Miles Davis record collection, moved to Kentucky to live with a woman he'd been talking to on the internet ever since we moved in together. It was all laid out for me in the note he left me." Shelly laughed, shook her head. "Actually, it was more of a book than a note. John always seemed to ramble on. Long winded explanation of why I live in a three bedroom townhouse, Barry."

London gently pulled Shelly to him and kissed her. She shook off his embrace and straightened up. Bitterness crossed her face. London felt guilty forcing himself on her. He got his signals crossed. On the ride to her place, she kept touching his hand and had confessed she thought about him a lot over the years.

"Hell with it," Shelly said and cupped London's face in her hands. She brought her lips to his and she made him remember why he took her virginity when they were teenagers. After a few minutes of deep kisses and groping, she lift herself from London.

"To hell with what?" London asked.

Shelly shrugged. "The past."

They were lying in Shelly's bed, not really talking, just saying random sentences and both would nod their head. The air conditioner would come on, and even though the air was cold on their bodies, neither would pull the comforter over their naked bodies. Shelly would every few minutes touch London's penis to get him hard, just to tease him. He wouldn't advance any further than kiss her. Finally, she climbed on top of him and rode him like a roller coaster in a tornado. Afterwards, they fell asleep, but Shelly woke London up, kissing his neck and rolling her fingers across the head of his already hard shaft.

She wanted another ride.

25

The sunlight was harsh and cut right into London's eyes. He sat up in the bed, stretched. Shelly was still in bed, curled up with her back to him. He was tempted for another round, but decided to let her sleep. The alarm clock on the end table next to Shelly said noon had already rolled by and 1.00pm threatened to show its ugly face.

London decided to look around Shelly's place, just for the hell of it.

The second bedroom was immaculate. The carpet was freshly vacuumed, the bed had not even been touched, and if there had been any dust anywhere, you'd need a microscope to find it. The room smelled like Elizabeth Taylor perfume. London recognized the fragrance because of an old girlfriend was heavy into that crap years ago. Thank God London went to jail. Saved him from a relationship filled with broken wine bottles, obsessions with Good Morning America, and stalking old boyfriends.

London remembered smelling the scent a few days ago. But where?

He shrugged, moved on to the next room.

The smell was repugnant, even from the hallway. The door to the next bedroom was a jarred. London pushed the door open and saw the lamps had been smashed. Holes in the walls the size of basketballs. Parts from vehicles lay all over the place. Cigarettes, various pieces of paper, cardboard boxes, even books, seemed to be either burnt to a crisp or partially burned. Even places of the carpet was black from small fires. A small radio with a busted speaker was playing *Moonage Daydream*.

There, on a mattress on the floor in the right corner

under a window, was a long legged man in a tattered military jacket. He was fast asleep, a half lit cigarette dangling from his parted, powder white lips. His eyes were sunken in and his nose was just a little nub. The skin was missing from his right jawbone, hair was missing from the left side of his head. The man was sprawled out on the mattress, arms and legs in a crucifix. A loud wheezing snore sounded like a low wailing from a train in the distance.

London had a feeling they'd met before.

As a matter of fact, London was certain that was the man he'd encountered inside the burned out building formerly known as the Coffin Hop.

The man stirred, opened his blurry eyes. Realization hit him hard. He jumped to his feet and charged London. London was ready for him. He already had a lamp in his hand. London swung and the stem of the lamp caught the man on the left side of his head. He went down hard, his face slammed against the seat of a kitchen chair. He was out cold.

London heard bare feet on the carpet in the hallway. Shelly stood in threshold of the man's room, completely naked, pointing a Glock M9 at London's balls.

"I see you reacquainted yourself with Gavin," Shelly had a smirk on her face.

"Yeah. We met up again a few days ago," London said. "At the Coffin Hop. What's wrong with his face?"

"A mortar went off. Killed almost everyone in his regiment, but him. They shipped him back to Samantha. Back then Sam was so grief stricken, she couldn't bear to see Gavin like he was. So Chief Holt and Sam placed him in a home. Told everyone he'd died. Hell, they even held a funeral for him," Shelly laughed, shook her head. Can you believe that? Any-who…I comforted Sam. She needed a lot of comfort."

"You're still comforting me," Sam sashayed to

Shelly, kissed her long and hard. Shelly accepted the kiss passionately, quickly turned the Berretta back at London. "Oh damn, Barry. You found out our dirty little secret."

"Mmmm…" Shelly kissed Samantha again. "So dirty," she cooed.

"Which one," London said sarcastically. "The fact that Gavin is still alive, yet you're married to Billy? Or… you're actually sleeping with Billy's sister?" London laughed. "Wait. The Sheriff of Loughlin County you killed, Shelly…? Hell, I don't know. I'm still confused!"

"He wanted to blackmail us about Gavin still being alive," Shelly said through clenched teeth. "Nobody blackmails us!"

Samantha shrugged, raised an eyebrow. "Well, I was thinking of the one where we're using my disfigured, mentally cracked husband to burn down businesses who refused to pay for our protection. But I guess all three will do."

"And we had such high hopes you could join us, Barry," Shelly purred, touched Samantha's shoulder. "In our company, Barry, pleasure is business."

"You know," Samantha looked London up and down salaciously. "I could go for that right now."

Shelly scoffed, rolled her eyes. "Sam, let's think of the business first."

"God, you're a slave driver!" Samantha shot back and giggled.

"Did Holt know about this venture you two have?"

"Daddy?" Samantha laughed. "Daddy knew as much as we would let him know."

"Which is very little," Shelly said.

"I take it Billy doesn't know either."

"He can only keep his mind on one or two things at once. That fucking auto shop and 'so-called family'…

enough to make you sick." Samantha crossed her arms, leaned against the bedroom wall. "I like to have fun," she rolled her eyes.

London was curious. He had to ask: "So… that club… the Coffin Hop… was under the protection of the county cops, wasn't it?"

"We run this area!" Shelly screamed. Her eyes were large, blood red, and full of hate. "Not those pinheads in Loughlin County! We, Gemma city, is the reason there is industry around here! Jobs for the people of both Gemma and Loughlin!"

"What do you say, London," Shelly threw her two cents in. "You in with us or out?"

"If you're in," Samantha giggled. "We'll have fun…"

"If you're out," Shelly finished for Samantha. "You're dead."

London laughed, shook his head. "I'm just here to have the Cougar fixed. Okay?"

Shelly shrugged. "Looks like you're dead, then."

One shot was fired.

It wasn't Shelly.

A sniper's rifle sounded off and a bullet flew through the only window Gavin had not broken. The bullet struck Shelly in her right eye.

She fell hard at their feet. Samantha immediately screamed and couldn't stop screaming. London tackled her just in time for another bullet to fly by and imbed into the wall where she'd stood. London fell on top of Samantha, stifled her screams with a hand. Another round of bullets tore into walls and the bedroom door.

Gavin came to. Once what little senses were about him, realization of the situation, he jumped to his feet and howled at the busted window pane.

"Get down, you fucking moron!" London screamed

at him.

Gavin didn't listen. He kept howling, waving his arms, yelling nonsense words at the shooter. Two bullets ripped through Gavin's chest. He fell on his back, convulsed, spat blood. "I'm on it, Sarge… " He said, and his eyes rolled into the back of his head as life left his body.

"Son of a bitch…" London whispered.

Then he saw the man in riot gear running across the roof of an empty building. It was far off, but he recognized him anyway.

Patrolman Fred Converse.

"Well," London smiled maliciously. "At least I know what side you are on, Converse."

26

Converse sat in the diner for a good hour or so, drinking three cokes and eating fries smothered in gravy. He flirted with the waitress, who paid very little attention to him, maybe just enough for the generous tip he left. He stood in front of the diner and bullshitted with the three old men who always sat out front and drank beer from a paper bag.

Converse visited his mother just outside Loughlin county line, in a small town called Rory. He was in her house for a good two hours. She fed him lunch, even though he'd already eaten, and they drank coffee as they discussed the family. When he was leaving, she kissed Converse on the cheek and told him how proud of him she was.

Converse went back to Gemma and went inside a car stereo shop. He greeted two black men, handed them a CD case. They gave him another CD case. He turned his back, opened the empty case, edged out the sleeve to see inside. There was a key to a locker at the bus station. The locker was had a satchel with Fifty thousand dollars inside. He pushed the sleeve back inside the case, closed it, and laughed as he patted both men on shoulder.

Converse got back into his vintage Firebird and travelled south through the tunnel. He ended up in Mayflower, on the wrong side of town. Trash ravaged the street and gangs patrolled their turf, even defended it from the local mailman. Converse went inside a ratty townhouse with a balcony on the top floor. From an open window, he could be seen kissing a young Hispanic woman in a nightgown. She slipped down to her knees and undid his fly. She took out his hard penis and began sucking feverishly. After a few minutes, Converse gently pushed her away,

helped her to her bare feet. He led her out to the balcony, forced her over the rail and slowly rolled up her nightgown to reveal her golden skin ass. Converse entered the Hispanic woman and jack rabbited her from behind for ten minutes before he sputtered and made silly faces as he came inside her.

Converse led her back inside where they did a few lines of coke and she cooked him a rice dish. They made love again on the stained white sofa and did a few more lines. The Hispanic woman fell asleep on the sofa next to Converse. He patted her on the head and stood up. He fixed his fly, took a moment to smell a finger that had been inside the Hispanic woman. He was pleased with himself. He left Mayflower via the tunnel and headed back to Gemma City.

Back in Gemma, he met up with Hornsby and Monroe. He gave Hornsby the CD. They shook hands and laughed. Monroe smoked his cigarette quietly. He was nervous, kept looking over his shoulder.

"Hey, let's get this over with, huh?" He said, threw the cigarette at Converse.

"We gotta wait for Donaldson," Converse said.

"We fuckin' made it," Hornsby said. "All those years of hustlin' small timers for chump change, stiff armin' dealers and pimps just to pay for my kid's braces… rescuing cats for little old ladies. Breakin' up fuckin' bar fights and catchin' a bottle upside the head!" He scoffed and laughed. "We made it, man!" He slapped Converse on the arm.

"Hell, if I'd known stealin' a disc with a video of the military was so lucrative, I would've done it years ago," Converse howled.

They heard a faint knocking.

"What the hell is that?" Monroe said.

"Aww…you're just being paranoid!" Converse dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

The knocking continued.

"No," Hornsby straightened up, cocked his head to one side. "I hear it too. Somebody's beatin' on something."

"You two are acting like pussies!" Converse laughed. "There's no one to stand in our way now! We own Gemma City!"

Monroe and Hornsby tracked the knocking to a '73 Cougar on the lot stuck between a Lincoln and a Sierra pickup. The knocking got louder. Now they could hear muffled cries coming from the trunk. A key was in the trunk. Hornsby and Converse drew their weapons. Monroe was too nervous to do that. He was so nervous he backed away, ducked between the Lincoln.

Hornsby and Converse's eyes met, an intense glare. Hornsby placed a hand on the key, ready to unlock the trunk. Converse nodded to him to go ahead. Hornsby turned the key and the trunk popped open. There was Donaldson. Hands tied behind his back and ankles bound by the same nylon rope. He tried in vain to speak through the cloth that gagged him. His eyes was large and red, in a state of panic.

A note was pinned to him saying: Surprise!

A gunshot was heard.

Silence.

Monroe lunged forward away from the Cadillac He fell at Hornsby and Converse's feet, a bullet hole in the back of his head. Converse flinched, fired at the Cadillac. A bullet struck the back window, causing the glass to shatter. London popped up from the frontend of the Cadillac and fired twice. The bullets zipped through Hornsby's chest and throat. He fell to the ground with a loud thud.

Converse began to shake. He dropped his weapon, held up his hands. "Please… Don't shoot… I give up…"

London shrugged. "So what."

He fired twice more. Both bullets entered Converse's

head and exited quickly. He fell beside Hornsby and Monroe, locked in a circle of death. London searched Converse's pockets, found a ticket to a locker. On the top of the ticket it informed London that Tradewest Depot was where Converse kept the cash from the sale of the disc.

London walked toward the open trunk of his Cougar. Donaldson kicked and screamed. London reached inside, took a hold of Donaldson's jacket and pulled him out, dropping him on hard pavement. Donaldson tried in vain to scream for help or beg London to cut him loose. Either way London couldn't understand the pitiful man turning beat red.

London closed the trunk and got inside the Cougar. He started the engine and sped off.

27

The '73 Cougar pulled into the parking lot of Billy Hope's garage. Billy stood there, looking dumbfounded. The Cougar pulled up beside him. The window rolled down to reveal London at the wheel, sporting dark sunglasses and a gleaming smile.

"Barry," Billy chuckled. "I thought you left town after Shelly's funeral."

"No," London shook his head. "I had some unfinished business." He reached into the seat and retrieved the CD, handed it to Billy.

"What the hell is this? A mix tape?"

"Not exactly. Just look inside."

Billy did so. He was further perplexed.

"A key to a locker at Tradewest Depot? The fuck is this…?"

"Just go there," London told him. "Take what is inside. Don't ask questions. You hear me? Asking questions can get you killed. Or your family."

"Uhhh… Okay, Barry. I still don't understand…"

Do me favor, Bill?"

"Yeah," Billy said. "Sure-whatever you say, Barry."

"Go get Samantha and the boys. Get the fuck out of Gemma City." He smiled. "I know I am."

London hit the gas and the '73 Cougar sped off, never to let the sun hit the tailpipe in that town, ever again.